Mooresville

By Matthew Striegel

To my father and his parents,

W.A. Striegel (1924-2016)

and Georgia Striegel

If there is a real Mooresville, their home of Floyds Knobs, Indiana would be it.

Prologue

“What I am about to tell you sounds too incredible to believe.”

It was early evening. As had been my habit for several years now, I was having dinner with several old college friends. Of course, all of us had left college long ago.

My name is Walter Jameson. I am president of Oakwood University, located in the southwestern part of Indiana, about two hours from Louisville, Kentucky. The town and its small liberal arts college had been in existence since the mid 1800’s. Most who attended there major in business, philosophy, or the ministry. While it had been founded by a Methodist minister, the college is not affiliated with any denomination, and offers either undergraduate degrees or full credentials for non-denominational ministers.

My friends include Dr. Charles Beaumont, a professor specializing in Apsu and Sumerian history, Dr. Levi Christopher, professor of philosophy, Dr. Donald Fowler, Beaumont's cousin and minister of the local church, and Dr. Amos Thorne, psychiatrist on the staff at Whately hospital. All intelligent men, and all open minded enough to be interested in knowledge of other disciplines than their own.

"I must tell you about a patient I had been treating," Thorne continued.

"Doesn't that violate patient confidentiality?" Fowler asked.

"In most cases, yes," Thorne answered. "But the patient in question was a John Doe. He was picked up by the police about a month ago, wandering the road outside of town. The man was in a complete state of amnesia. Who he was, where he came from, nothing

could be remembered. He couldn't even say how long he'd been wandering."

He paused and took a sip of his water. "You know that I have always tried to be rational and reasonable in life, and in my practice. There are, however, a few cases that I am unable to explain in completely mundane, rational terms."

"Shakespeare's quote from Hamlet is overused, but still largely true," Fowler pointed out. "'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in your philosophy.'" He, Beaumont, and Christopher are devout Christians. I'm a believer too, but am what Fowler calls a 'Chriseaster.' Thorne has never been a believer, either before or after our college years.

"Yes well, let me tell you the facts in the case first," Thorne said. "The man appeared to be in his upper sixties to lower seventies, tall, grey haired, and slender.

Physically, he was in good shape; mentally he seemed otherwise sane and articulate.

“For many days, we had tried counseling and standard psychiatric medication. He was referred to me, so one day I called him into my office.”

I

“Tell me, sir,” Dr. Thorne asked. “Are you familiar at all with hypnosis?”

The patient was resting on a couch in the doctor’s office. Dr. Thorne sat in a chair beside him, a notebook on his lap and a watch in his hand. A stereotypical scene, perhaps, but Thorne found out that most patients responded to the familiar and expected. Most fears, after all, were really fears of the unknown.

“Well…I doubt it’s like it is in stories,” his patient said with a slight smile.

Thorne chuckled. “No, no. Nothing magical about it.” He became serious again. “It’s simply a tool to help you focus. We’ve talked a few times, and it sounds like, beneath your conscious mind, your memories lie.”

“Memories I’ve lost?”

“I don’t believe memories are gone simply because they are forgotten. It’s the access to them that we lose.”

Thorne dangled the watch on its chain. The man obediently followed it with his eyes.

“Now, I want you to relax. We’re going to focus. There’s no tension; there’s no pressure. Just calm. Concentration.”

The man’s eyelids grew heavy. His breathing deepened, and his limbs were loose.

“Can you hear me?” Thorne asked.

The man nodded.

“Good. Just reach back. Look for those connections. Your memories are still there. Let them come. They won’t hurt you. No reason to fear them. You are safe. You’re relaxed. Your memories are you. Let them come to you.”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember your name?”

There was a pause. “No.”

“All right. Just let yourself relax. Dig deep, but gently.”

Dr. Thorne waited a moment. “Do you remember where you were picked up? On that road outside of town?”

“Yes.”

“Where were you coming from?”

A pause. “A field. I was in a field. Or rather, a clearing several miles long and wide. Surrounded on all sides by woods. The sky is blue, and there only a few bird calls in the distance.”

“Woods you say?” Dr. Thorne made a few notes in his notebook.

“It’s like they go on forever. That’s what I did think growing up.”

“You’re familiar with this place?”

“Oh yes.” The man paused again. “This is home.”

“What else is there?”

“A poorly paved road, and at the edge of the woods off the path, there’s a car. An old fifties Chevy. With the fins and straight lines. Probably a good car once. It’s

broken down; the windows are smashed in. Leaves, dirt and bugs are inside."

"Anything else?"

"There's another car behind it. Just inside the woods. It's completely rusted out. Weeds and shrubs are growing around and through it. It's a Ford truck, from the twenties I believe."

"You seem to know your cars. Are you a mechanic?"

"Don't know."

"Anything else that you can see?"

"It's a graveyard. The cars. They're a graveyard."

That was a strange way of putting it. Dr. Thorne kept writing.

"I'm walking down the path. I see a foundation near the cars. A house was here. Mine."

“Go on.”

“I’m walking again. There are fields on each side. There are more foundations. Some houses too. Abandoned, and boarded up. No one’s been here for a while.”

The man paused and his brow furrowed. “Now, what’s that?”

“What?” Thorne asked. “What do you see?”

“There’s a carnival stand. One of those booths where you toss rings or shoot rubber ducks with water pistols, in order to win a stuffed animal. The prizes are hanging up. There’s also portable rides. They’re in the part of the field. Small Ferris Wheels, a carousel. Things like that.”

“Do you see anyone else? Are you alone?”

“I don’t see anyone. The lights are on; there’s a generator by the booths. But it’s closed for business. It’s like a county fair that hasn’t been taken down yet.”

“No one anywhere? Not even in the field? Are you able to look forward?”

“There’s an old wooden fence at the end of the fair booths. A few old buildings are past it. Also abandoned, broken down and decaying. The biggest is a church. I’m in the center of the town. The fair is commemorating the town’s history. It is an important site now.”

He paused. “I’m walking up the church walkway now. Grass on either side is growing wild and uncut in the church’s front yard. This whole place is a graveyard. But a celebrated one.”

“Can you describe the church?”

“It’s stone. The front façade has a tower that also doubles as a steeple. It’s leaning off to the side. I don’t think it’ll last much longer. The doorway is open, because the doors are long gone.

“I’m walking in. I see the pews on either side, part of an altar, and a rotted wooden cross. In the foyer, there’s a stairway leading up the tower. Pastor worked and lived up there. I see a rotted bed, desk and bible. It’s not stable here. The tower could fall any time.”

“Then it’s time to go for now,” Dr. Thorne coaxed. “Let’s come back now. You’re waking up in my office. Staying calm, and relaxed.”

“Mooresville,” the man said, almost in a whisper.

“I’m sorry?”

“Mooresville. That’s this place. My home. Mooresville.”

Dr. Thorne snapped his fingers. The man's eyes fluttered and opened.

He looked at the therapist for a moment. Then tears ran down his cheeks. "It's a graveyard," he said again. "All of it. It's all dead."

Dr. Thorne put a hand on his shoulder. "It's all right," he told the man reassuringly.

The man kept crying. "A graveyard. I'm it. I'm the last."

II

"What did he mean by that?" I asked Dr. Thorne when he finished relating the first therapy session.

"I did some research on the term Mooresville after I sent him back to his room. After that episode, I put him on an antidepressant and kept a watch on him. Fortunately, he wasn't suicidal."

“But Mooresville?” Dr. Christopher asked. “You said there’s a town in Indiana?”

“Two towns once,” Dr. Thorne corrected. “One was the home of John Dillinger for a time, of all people. But there used to be a second smaller one near here. Several miles east of Oakwood, past Rodman and Lagoda, but still in Matheson County.”

“What happened to it?” Fowler asked.

“It was just a small farming town. Because it never had good roads, or a train station like Oakwood at one point, it gradually diminished in population. Eventually it was abandoned in the late fifties and fell into ruin.”

“Like the description your patient gave.” I pointed out.

“Correct. Indeed, county fairs were held there for a few years. To celebrate and remember the first

community founded in Indiana after it achieved statehood. That tradition dropped off due to the remoteness of the site."

"What about your patient?" Fowler asked. "Why did he remember it?"

"He was an older guy, Thorne said," Beaumont reminded him. "Probably remembered going there as a kid. Maybe that's why he was wandering in that area after his amnesia or delusions, or whatever they were." He smiled at Thorne. "But of course, you're the psychiatrist."

"That's what I initially thought too," Thorne said. "That's reasonable. But…well…let me go on. The next session I had with him was essentially the same as the first. I put him under hypnosis again, and this is what he related."

There was a sizeable crowd at the county fair that evening. Vendors lined the path, selling fried food and chances to win prizes. Further off, the Ferris wheel lifted passengers up so high that they could see past the abandoned village to the woods. Sometimes they could just make out the larger highway, leading towards Oakwood and the still living parts of Indiana.

On a stage, two men addressed a small crowd. One middle aged, the other elderly. They looked similar enough that anyone could see that they were father and son. The younger man stood before a microphone.

“Welcome to the annual Matheson County Fair,” he greeted. “I’m Jacob Moore, head of the county parks and recreation department. This year, we have decided to return to Mooresville, the first settlement in the area. Over one hundred fifty years ago, a group of German,

English and Irish immigrants settled here. Led by John Moore, my ancestor, they found a home and livelihood in the fertile farmland.

"Initially Catholic, they converted to Methodism after the circuit rider and pastor, Reverend John Matheson, came to the area. He later founded Oakwood University and gave the county its name. However, over time, Oakwood grew while Mooresville declined. The community gradually moved to other homes in Oakwood, Rodman, and elsewhere. But my dad here, Jerome Moore, has often told me we have to remember our history before we can move forward. Dad?"

He stepped aside and let the older man speak.

"I was born here, over seventy years ago," he began. "Apart from serving in the Great War, I lived here until people began moving out. My wife and I ran a marina after farming largely ended."

He paused and bit his lip. “I’m the last person who can make that claim. But I’m glad to see…I’m glad to see it living on in you. God bless you all.”

There was some applause and then the crowd dispersed to mingle with the other attendees. Jerome and his son stepped down from the podium and joined the rest of their family. There was also a daughter, in laws, and about half a dozen grandchildren.

“Good speech, dad,” the son said, patting the older man’s shoulder.

“Thank you, Jacob,” he replied. “He looked at the others. “Thank you for coming. Jan, how’s the marina?”

“Doing well, dad,” the daughter answered. “Keeping it going. Mom would be happy.”

“Yes.” Jerome looked over his shoulder at the church. “Could we all see her?”

“I want to ride the rides,” one of the little grandkids piped up.

“Won't be long,” Jacob assured him. “Come on.”

They walked to the end of the booths. Beyond were the ruins of the town. Past the fence stood the falling down church. The family made their way to the cemetery in front. They stopped at a grave that read Shannon Moore 1900-1963. The name of Jerome was also carved there, with the birth date of 1898. No death date yet, of course.

“I miss her,” Jerome said, his hands folded in reverence and respect. “Some times were tough. But we had good times too.”

He paused. “Yes,” he said softly. “There are times I’ll never forget. Times I wish I could. That’s life.”

“Can we go now?” one of the grandchildren whined.

He smiled. “Go ahead.”

“Love you, mom,” Jan said. She kissed her hand and put it on the headstone.

The women and children made their way back to the sights and sounds of the fair. Father and son stood looking at the grave. Despite it being a few yards away, the fair seemed much farther off and distant to the older man. His mind was somewhere else, and with someone else.

“I lied,” Jerome remarked after a few minutes.

“What about?” asked the son.

“Living on in memories.” The father shook his head. “Memories aren’t people. Even the best ones are no substitute for the real person.”

He looked sideways, and pointed to another, unmarked grave.

“Pastor here, used to say similar things. He told me once that the whole living on in memory thing is just a holdover from our Norse ancestors, with their notions of Ragnarok. But that, for Christians, heaven wasn’t like that. There people lived on indeed.”

“He did say things like that,” Jacob remembered.

“The kids in my generation didn’t go to school, unlike you,” Jerome continued. “But Pastor taught us how to read and write. On Sundays, he’d teach us arithmetic, history and the Bible out of the books he had. He was a strange, but strangely wise man. No one remembers where he came from. But for as long as I could remember, he was Pastor. Until he wasn’t.”

He walked down the row of graves, pointing out his parents and his wife’s parents.

“Grandpa O’Malley never got along with you,” Jacob remembered. “That was one of the reasons you and mom had most of your fights.”

“You saw more of that than you should have” Jerome replied. “Sorry for that.”

The son shrugged. “It is what it is. For all of that, I never doubted that you, mom and grandpa loved me and Jan.”

“Yes, that much is true. Mr. O’Malley could see past me to look at you. Even when your mother and I separated.”

“You ended up staying together. After the storm and all.”

Jerome grunted and kept walking. Although Jacob knew who was buried here already, he let his old father

keep talking. Jerome pointed to friends and neighbors who had died before Jacob had been born.

There was his maternal uncle, also named Jacob, who had been killed in the First World War. There was Zachary Applegate, another veteran who, like Jerome, had returned home and married an O'Malley girl. His bride had been Shannon's younger sister, Rhiannon.

"He was something of a bully when we were kids," Jerome remembered. "Still arrogant as an adult. We weren't close friends but weren't enemies either. Not after the war, anyway. And for a long time, he was a constant in my life, along with the other people and places here."

He stood on the front steps of the abandoned church. No one was allowed there, anymore. His son stood by him as they gazed on the somber, neglected

graveyard near them. Beyond that, the lights and sounds of the fair went on.

The visitors, despite being here ostensibly to remember the past town of Mooresville largely ignored it. Jacob remembered reading Poe's Masque of the Red Death in college. The revelers there had ignored the farthest hall in their fortress, too, because it represented Death. But Death can never be ignored forever.

Another man was in the graveyard, and this may have been the reason why Jacob remembered the story. An old gray man in a grey suit strolled between the graves. Jacob waved to him when the man glanced up at them. The man waved back, and then silently turned to the fair. Soon he was lost to sight. Probably another person who had family here.

“It’s a graveyard,” Jerome said, quietly. He hadn’t paid any attention to the other man. “All of it. It’s all dead. A graveyard. I’m it. I’m the last.”

“Dad,” Jacob began. “I…I don’t know how to say this. But, well, budget cuts are happening again. There will still be county fairs of course, but I don’t think they will be held here anymore.”

Jacob, through his position, had tried to keep Mooresville’s memory alive for his father’s sake. But the fact remained that its remoteness kept it from having an afterlife, just as it had kept it from having a continued life in the past. Practical budgeting was ever the order of business, and sentimentality didn’t equal purchasing power.

“Lots of the vendors have practically begged that we go to Oakwood or somewhere else,” Jacob continued.

“And to be fair, it is a pain to move all the rides and booths here. And attendance has been down.”

Jerome bowed his head and closed his eyes. He didn’t cry, and that was a small blessing. Jacob felt guilt ridden as it was. He hated disappointing his father as much as anyone else.

“Are you angry?”

The old man sighed. “No. Just sad. It doesn’t matter to the young people. I know that.”

“Dad…”

“Just to me. They mattered to me. But it’s okay. I’ll be with them soon enough.”

“Dad…”

“Just bury me here. That’s all I ask.”

“Dad,” Jacob sighed himself. “Want to see the other graveyard?”

Despite the somber sounding words, Jerome laughed. “You remember that?”

“Of course.”

The other ‘graveyard’ in fact was located at the other end of the abandoned town. Next to a foundation were two derelict cars. These were the bodies of this particular cemetery. Father and son, side by side, walked over to pay their respects there too.

The newer of the cars was a fifties model, chrome, fins and all. Despite not being here terribly long, its windows had been broken by a fallen tree. Insects, mildew and the weather had all but destroyed the interior. The outside colors had faded, and the top was badly dented by the now rotting tree trunk on top.

“I have to admit,” Jacob said. “I came out here once and took the hubcaps. They were still in decent shape at the time and, well, they were chrome and all. Thought I could sell them but felt so bad I brought them back.”

The second car was twenty or thirty years older, far more rusted, and almost hidden by honey suckle. That plant is the kudzu of the Midwest, growing wild, fast and smothering. Both cars had, of course, been Jerome’s at different times in his life. Strange that they had lasted longer than his old homestead.

The walked around the foundation, and then slowly made their way back to the fair.

“Youth is wasted on the young, huh Pop?”

Jacob said this in reference to his children and his sister’s. They were running about, some on rides, some at the booths, and some begging their mothers for some

of the overpriced and over fried concessions. Jerome watched them and smiled sadly.

“Let them have their ‘wasted youth.’ We had ours in our time, too.”

III

Dr. Thorne paused when the waitress interrupted us, asking if we needed anything. I ordered another round of beers to keep her happy. Thorne, the secular one among us was, ironically, the only teetotaler. He had only water. Fowler had reminded us once that drunkenness, not drinking was the sin. So, we enjoyed our libations with a clear conscience in moderation.

“So, he had another dream about Mooresville?” Fowler asked.

“Yes,” Thorne confirmed. “You will quickly see that all of his dreams involved that spot, or the people around it.”

“So, he was having a recurring dream?” I asked.

“Not exactly. Each dream was a different part of the same story. The next one would build on the previous one, which would build on the one before that, and so on.”

Thorne took a drink of water before continuing.

“Another thing about the dreams involved them all being subconscious. Every morning, I would ask the patient if he had dreamed the night before. Or rather, if he remembered dreaming, since we all technically dream a few times every night. When someone says they don’t, they only mean they can’t remember.”

Beaumont nodded. “Right. So, the first dream was before the fair started, and the next one was when he went? Like a part one and part two?”

“It seemed that way at first,” Thorne said. “But the third dream recalled under hypnosis disproved that theory.”

It was a dark cold night. Winter had come, and the Moores were in their bed, trying to stay warm. Heaps of blankets covered them, and yet they still remained cold. Jerome Moore, however, shivered from something different from mere cold.

Shannon was dying.

Hospice nurses were nearby, ready to swoop down with their narcotics at the first sign of distress. Jerome could hear them at their station, talking in low voices

while a grey suited visitor strolled through the halls. He couldn't make out what they were saying, but that hardly mattered now.

Jerome held her, trying to feel the remaining spark of life in her. She knew the Lord, as did he. Regardless of past sins or mistakes, they had always asked forgiveness after stumbling. The Lord had seen them through, year after year, decade after decade, until they reached this point.

The final day of one's life, he realized, was also the final test of faith.

It was a subtler test than the usual trials and tribulations. For those hit with the searing pain of an explosion. Like those he had seen up close in the war. He shuddered, not wanting to relive that again. But he had learned neither to suppress nor dwell on such things. The pain of it washed over, and then went on it's

way into the past. Even the worst of those memories were mitigated by the fact that he had survived them. Now they were only so many bad dreams against the looming eternity.

This pain, however, that of growing old, was less a sharp cut and more of a dull ache.

Shannon opened her eyes, and looked at him through her drooping, paralyzed face. Her blue eyes had remained clear and bright. Her speech, however, had been taken by the last stroke. But she was still there with him, for when he spoke to her, he could see that she understood.

A distant memory came to him, something he'd long forgotten. He pointed towards the opposite wall. When she looked, he put his hand in front of the lamp. Making a shadow puppet, he made the scene of a bird making a

pecking motion. Shannon smiled, and her body gently shook with silent laughter.

Their eyes met, and he took her hand. Bending close, he whispered a Psalm that they had memorized in church, many years ago. The most well-known of David's, it was a Psalm of death and life. Of fear and faith. It had been the first scripture that Pastor had made them memorize.

Now, it endured, even when other bits of knowledge had faded. Perhaps there was a lesson in that. Perhaps, when all worldly things passed away, as they must, that was all that did remain. Just a man, a woman, and their God.

Shannon closed her eyes for the last time. He clutched her closer to him and wept silently. Then, he slowly stood to get to the nurses. His only consolation was that he couldn't be alone for too much longer.

IV

“So ended my third session with the patient,” Dr. Thorne said. “And you can now see the pattern.”

“The dreams were chapters, but in reverse,” Christopher said. “Moving into the past, not the future.”

“So, the first dream would have been after the fair was over,” I ventured. “Not before it began.”

“That is my belief too,” Thorne said. He sat in silence for a moment, before resuming. Fowler and Beaumont ordered dessert while I asked for another beer.

Jacob pulled up to his parent's home, at the edge of town. The church's steeple was straight, and there were doors, albeit locked. The windows were also boarded up. The church had closed when Pastor died. The conference didn't consider it worth keeping open for such a small congregation.

Mooresville's population had been steadily dwindling, until there was only a dozen or so people left. The old O'Malley tavern was also closed and boarded up. While most of the homes still stood, they too were closed, abandoned, and weather-beaten.

It was easy enough to tell which homes were still inhabited. Those had intact windows and an attempt at painted outer walls. The grass immediately around them was still cut, and a few small gardens had been attempted.

Jacob looked over his shoulder as he pulled into his parent's driveway. The fields, where farmland had once been were all overgrown. The only people still here were a few old residents who had been too set in their ways to move.

It wasn't that any one thing had killed the town, or rather, village. Merely the passage of time. The older people had continued living as their parents had, and their parents before them. They had been simple farmers, living by their own means and supplementing what they couldn't grow or make themselves by selling surplus at various farmers' markets.

But the modern world had come, and left Mooresville behind. Soon, people were leaving agriculture for manufacturing. Soon, the country would largely leave manufacturing for services. The world would grow and become more advanced, more

complicated, and more interconnected with each passing year. But nothing comes free, and soon, small towns would face extinction, and with it a calmer, cozier, more intimate way of life. Yes, perhaps it had been a more ignorant life, where tolerance was rarer and medicine inferior. Still, which way was happier?

Jacob parked and walked up the driveway. His mother sat in a chair on the porch and waved at him. Jacob gave her a hug and a kiss before he asked where his father was.

"Out back. Trying to get the car to start," she told him.

Jacob walked around and saw Jerome hunched over the motor of his Chevy. The hood was up, and he was adding oil to the engine.

"Hi, Pop," he called out. "Still have this old thing?"

Jerome looked up, smiled, and wiped his oily hands on his equally oily trousers.

“Yes. I’m sorry, Jacob, but when we move, you’ll probably have to take us.”

Jacob had finally, after months of wheedling, persuaded his parents to move into Howard Phillips retirement home in nearby Oakwood. He looked at his dad. Grey, wrinkled, but trim, his greasy clothes showed a man still trying to be self-reliant. But at his age, and being this isolated, Jacob didn’t want anything to happen to happen to his parents. Particularly if there was no one around to help.

Besides, his mother was slowing down even more. She had always been a larger woman, but had put on more weight in recent years, owing to becoming more sedentary. She had been exhibiting chest pains, and Jacob feared she could only be a day away from a heart

attack or stroke. That, more than anything, had been what had made them finally relent.

“I figured I would have to anyway,” Jacob said again, giving his old father a hug. He walked over to the car. While the body wasn’t in terrible shape, he could see the worn engine parts. And he wasn’t even a mechanic.

“I can’t complain,” Jerome said. “Wouldn’t do any good anyway. The car only lasted about ten years.”

“Closer to fifteen,” Jacob corrected.

Jerome’s brow furrowed. “Really? Well, yeah, I guess so. Time flies. I tried to get it back up and running. It doesn’t have that many miles on it.”

“Country miles, Pop. Driving up and down hills isn’t like going down Route 66.”

“Still, that one lasted me longer.”

He pointed over his shoulder at a rusty Ford truck from the twenties. It hadn't run in years, but Jerome had never hauled it away for scrap. He just couldn't bring himself to. Too many memories. Sometimes Jacob wished he had though, given the embarrassing time he had had with it.

"Let me try it just one more time," Jerome told his son. He went over to the Chevy, slammed down the hood, and sat himself in the driver's seat. He fished the keys out of his pocket and tried to start.

The car sputtered a few times, but the engine never quite turned over. Repeated attempts only caused it to belch black smoke out of the tailpipe. Jerome turned the car off and rubbed his eyes. The car's time had passed. He understood that.

He got out of the car and faced his son. “I think I’m starting a graveyard of cars. First the Ford, and now the Chevy. Time flies.”

“Time flies,” Jacob agreed.

“At any rate, the few who are still here will be leaving soon too. Like you said, it’s too far away from everything.”

“Yeah. Pop, I have some papers for you to sign. The admission paperwork for the home.”

“Come on inside. I’ll have a look at it.”

They did, and Jacob looked around his parent’s old home with mingled dismay and relief. Dismay that the old place had fallen on hard times. Relief that they were leaving it.

There was a leak in the roof that had a bucket under it. The light fixtures were old, and the lights were dim.

There was the smell of mold somewhere. A glance into their bedroom showed that it was in somewhat better condition. But there were suitcases all over the floor where his mother had been packing.

They all sat at the kitchen table. Jacob's parents looked over the forms and began to sign where it told them too. Jacob looked around the kitchen. The table and chairs were at least as old as he was, as were the dishes and cookware. They had only gotten a refrigerator in the last twenty or so years and never did get any type of dishwasher.

His mother washed the dishes in the sink by hand and hung out laundry to dry on a clothesline as she had always done. Briefly, he remembered drying dishes alongside his mother and felt a pang of guilt. He had told himself over and over that this was the right thing to do. Still…

“The home is a nice one,” Jacob told them. “Not like some of these others. And I’ll stop by as much as I can. Jan will too, between running the marina and all.”

“We know, Jacob, we know,” his mother assured him. “We’re not angry. Really. It may be good for us to meet some new people.”

“I'll even get the car towed and running for you again. You’ll see.”

“Enough about us. How are you doing?” Jerome asked. “How’s the park’s department going?”

“Well. I’ve been promoted to leader of the county fair committee,” Jacob told them. “I was thinking. Mooresville is going to Matheson County when the last people…”

He trailed off, stood, and looked out the window. “There is enough space for the fair here. We could clear

the field, bring in some vendors. Yes, I think that would be nice."

"It would be," Jerome agreed. "The town could live on that way."

He took Shannon's hand and she smiled.

"Yes. A good thing. Remember the past. Look to the future. Enjoy the moment."

"Who said that? Pastor?"

Jerome nodded. They sat in silence for a few minutes. Then Shannon stood up.

"I'll finish packing tonight. Tomorrow, you can take us to our new home. Anything else you can see if you or your sister need."

"Sure. I'll see about the car as well."

V

“The son never got the car,” Fowler noted.

We all had a chuckle at that before Dr. Thorne continued.

“The chapters seemed very well thought out and detailed. So much that I began to wonder if they were dreams and delusions after all. They didn’t have any fantastic or grotesque moments I’d expect from a repressed memory manifesting as something else. So, I went to Howard Phillips Retirement Home. I asked the director if I could see their records.”

He leaned in closer, as though conveying a great secret.

“There was indeed a Jerome and Shannon Moore who lived there in the sixties. Shannon died of a heart attack. Her husband followed five years later of pneumonia. There weren’t any pictures though.”

“You find that significant?” I asked.

“I do. Why I do will have to wait until I tell you everything.”

Hand in hand, Jerome and Shannon walked by a beach at sunset.

“Well, I never got you to the ocean,” Jerome told his wife. “But Lake Michigan might as well be.”

They sat down on the beach and watched the waves. Both were slightly less gray and wrinkled than in the last account. But they were still clearly not that young anymore, either. While Shannon still had a few red hairs left, Jerome was completely grey and thinning on top. His skin had gone leathery, from a lifetime of working outside. But his eyes were still clear and thoughtful, and he was thinking now.

“Are you happy, Shannon?” he asked.

“Happier.” She turned to him and smiled slightly. “I know this sort of thing isn’t easy for you, Rome. Thank you.”

“Pastor was right,” he told her. “We can’t hide forever.”

They had been talking to Pastor a lot lately. He and Shannon were trying to help Jerome get through the pain of the war, which he had been keeping to himself for years. Ever since returning home, he had been trying to hide from the world. The problem had been that Shannon hadn’t wanted to hide, but to see the world.

He had been trying. They had been to Corydon, then Louisville, and now here. He would try to take her somewhere every year while they had the money.

Fortunately, while they had never been wealthy, they had also been frugal enough to keep going.

“I’d like to go to St. Louis next year,” Shannon said.

“Possibly,” he replied. “We’ll see.” He sighed. “If we don’t have a wedding to pay for. Jan’s getting serious about that boy.”

She smiled. “Getting worried about dancing with your daughter?”

“Among other things.”

“I danced with Jacob. You can take your turn.”

She snuggled up to him and gave him a kiss. “They’ll be fine. We were.”

“True enough. They won’t have it easy all the time.”

“Neither did us. But that’s life. You can’t hide from it.”

“No,” he agreed. “No, you can’t.”

VI

“Well, if Mr. Moore has been dead for fifteen years, then this man couldn’t be him or anyone who knew him,” I said.

“Not necessarily,” Fowler answered. “He could have easily been old enough to have been at one of the county fairs.”

“Maybe the son?” Christopher asked.

“I don’t think so,” Thorne replied.

“I hear the shells,” Jerome recalled. He and Shannon were in Pastor’s office. They were discussing their marriage and their other issues with him. Because, despite everything, they still loved each other. They

would do what it took to draw closer together. For Jerome, that meant opening up about his greatest tragedy.

“The ground is ugly and dead. The only living things are people,”

Jerome bit his lip as he remembered aloud. Shannon held his hand.

“Your brother was gone before we knew what happened. But Zachary and I were alive. I’m sorry he didn’t come back. I don’t know why I was spared.”

He looked from Shannon to Pastor. Shannon hugged him. “You should have told me,” she said. “You should have told dad.”

He looked sheepish. “I did. Eventually.”

“I know you didn’t want to,” Shannon said. “I know it was hard. No, wait, I don’t know. No one could. Except maybe grandpa.”

“That is why you and your father expected Jerome to be a returning hero and proud of it,” Pastor told her, not unkindly. “We get angry or sad when the unexpected happens. Or when things aren’t as they should be. Hence, Christ’s anger at the money changers. He already knew them, of course. Knew them to be a den of thieves.”

“I’ve been thinking,” Jerome said. “Shannon, I think the difference between your grandpa and I was that he fought in a war where there was no doubt his side was in the right. In the Civil War, he was fighting to free slaves and punish rebels. What were we doing in France?”

“You were protecting us too, Rome,” Shannon said. “The Germans were destroying our ships. President

Wilson was trying to create a world where people and nations could come together. Not tear each other apart. You were part of that, too."

"It's a fine line," Pastor said. "To open up and let people in. You don't want to push things down. Eventually, they will still bubble over. Nor can you live in the past forever."

"I tried to keep it down for years," Jerome admitted. "I just didn't understand why you couldn't see that. I wanted to put it behind me, Shannon. Why you'd get angry with me instead of just…I don't know. Understanding. Comforting."

"Rome, you never let me understand," she said gently. "And yes, I got angry. Angry at myself, because I couldn't make you stop hurting. Angry at you because you wouldn't let me help you. Angry at you because you

needed help in the first place, as horrible as that sounds."

"I would like it if you two would stand up for me, and face one another," Pastor told them.

When they complied, he continued. "Now, say what you are sorry for. You can also say what you think the other should apologize for."

It was a bold request. But they were here to connect. And they would never think of making a scene in front of Pastor.

"Shannon," Jerome began, taking her hand. "I'm sorry that I pushed you away over the years. I'm sorry I never took you anywhere, despite you wanting me to. I wish that you were more patient with me. I wished you understood that I never asked to have these burdens."

“Rome, I’m sorry I didn’t have more patience. I’m sorry for the times I was petty or hateful. I wish you would try new things with me. Go to new paces. This world doesn’t have to be all suffering and death.”

“Maybe,” Jerome said. He held Shannon close. No one spoke for a long time.

VII

“I checked with the county parks and recreation department,” Thorne said. “Jacob Moore retired from there several years ago. He lives in Florida. The marina, south of here on the Ohio, was run by his sister Jan before she sold it and moved away. The next part of what I’m telling you takes place there, in fact.”

Shannon drove up to the marina run by Jerome and Jan. In the years since farming alone no longer became a viable livelihood for them, the family had taken a risk by branching into a new type of business. It had done modestly well, but it seemed to be near impossible to just get ahead in the world.

It had been one of the many things they had argued about in the last few years. She hadn't wanted the business, but Jerome vetoed her wishes and bought it anyway. In the wake of their last fight, she had moved in with her parents. In fact, she had spent the day in Oakwood, seeing if there were any homes or apartments that she could afford in the event of a divorce. There hadn't been, and she was left not knowing what she really wanted.

She didn't exactly even want to leave Jerome. But she was tired of the arguments. Tired of his shutting

down when she tried to talk to him. Tired of regretting opportunities long missed.

She glanced at herself in the rearview mirror. While no longer young, she didn't look elderly either. She only had a few wrinkles and few wisps of gray hair among the still mostly red. Her eyes were bright and alert, albeit a little bloodshot from crying.

Could her life really be over already?

She had once thought of going to Oakwood University. Of getting a business degree and expanding her father's little tavern into a chain. Of travelling all over the state, maybe farther.

Instead, Jerome had come home from World War I. Before she knew it; she was a wife and mother. The years had carried on, and they had stayed put as Mooresville dwindled. Now, here she was. An ageing

housewife who had never been more than an hour from her home.

Jacob had avoided going to the Second World War by volunteering for the National Park Service as a conscientious objector. He had done this on Jerome's insistence, since Jerome didn't want his son to have the same wartime experience he had had. After working there, he returned and attended Oakwood University on the GI bill and was planning on making park service his life.

Jan, like her father, had a talent for business and now was the one who really ran the marina. Jerome just kept the boats in repair and offered canoe lesions. Shannon was happy that her children were finding their way on their own. Jan would probably move out once she had some money saved. So they wouldn't have to

stay together for the children's sake. What then was keeping them together?

Shannon parked and walked up to the office. Her daughter, Jan, was at the front desk.

"Mom?" Jan asked. She came from behind the desk and hugged her.

Shannon returned her embrace and looked at her. Like her brother, Jan had her mother's face and jaw line. Like their father, both of her children were darker haired, thinner, and sometimes would show facial expressions that Shannon knew she had seen on Jerome's face.

Jan had such an expression now. A timid look that reminded Shannon of a whipped dog. A pleading expression that wanted desperately to make things right.

An expression that made Shannon feel guilty, no matter how angry she had been.

“Are you coming home?” Jan asked in a small voice.

“I don’t know,” Shannon answered. Because she didn’t.

Jan bit her lip. “I mean…there’s never been any abuse or adultery has there? Couldn’t you and dad just work things out?”

“No, there’s been nothing like that. Your father’s not that kind of man.”

“I know you wanted to do more. But because Jacob and I came when we did…”

“Don’t talk that way. You and your brother are the best things that happened to me.”

She didn’t add that they were almost the only things. Jan’s lip trembled, and Shannon hugged her again.

“Please don’t leave,” Jan said, crying now. “Stay with us.”

“I won’t leave you. No matter what happens between me and your father. Is he down by the river now?”

“Mmm hmm. Are you going to talk to him?”

“For a bit.”

She pulled away. Jan wiped away her tears, but she still had the pitiful look. Shannon nodded once and went outside. Overhead, the sky was gray, and a light wind cooled and dampened things further.

She saw Jerome putting a boat on its carrying rack.

“Rome,” she called out.

He looked up and came over to her. “Shannon,” he said.

They approached each other. Since the last fight, they had had, neither had been eager to meet the other again. Now here they were, and the moment had passed.

What now?

“How are you?” he asked.

“Okay.” A lie.

“I talked with Pastor the other night,” he told her. “After I left.”

“What did he say?”

Still the preliminary probing. What would cause another fight? What would be okay to say? They

couldn’t walk on eggshells too much longer. That was no way to be, anyway. Better to get some definite answer, whatever that may be.

“He surprised me, as he often does. He asked me whether it was my marriage I wanted to save or if I just didn’t want to fail.”

“Yeah.”

She used that dismissive, passive aggressive tone she always acquired when she was angry with him. And over the years, that happened more and more. She hadn’t always been so angry. But, to be fair, it also bothered him more and more. He once even called her cruel. That hadn’t gone over well.

“Don’t shut me out,” he said.

“I was in Oakwood today,” she said, changing the subject. “It was a wasted trip. I’ll be going back to dad’s.”

“Would you like to go on the river for a while?”

The idea just came to him. They’d never done that together before. Indeed, there wasn’t much they did together, period. Maybe that was the problem.

“Why?” she asked.

“It always relaxes me. Being on the water makes you forget everything for a few hours.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Everything?”

“Well…”

He trailed off, grabbed the canoe he had just put away, and put it in the water. He turned to her and held out his hand. Shannon sighed but agreed to be led into

the boat. She didn’t see much point, but also wasn’t in a hurry to go back home. Her father would tell her again that she had made such a terrible mistake the day Jerome returned home.

He set her in carefully and went to grab an oar. Pushing the boat in the water, he waded in and climbed in the front. He began paddling out into the Ohio.

They didn’t say much to each other for a long time. The sky grew greyer and darker. Rain would come soon. He would have to watch the sky to make sure they got back on land in time.

“I just don’t see why we can’t work things out,” Jerome finally said. Shannon looked up.

“We’ve had our fights, sure. But haven’t I always supported you? Haven’t I always been a good father to our kids? Have I ever been cruel?”

She bristled at that word. He had called her that once. It had been the start of a rant about how when he needed affection, she would brush him off. When he needed reassurance, she would criticize him and then call it ‘honesty.’ He felt like, as her husband, he should also be her hero. And he wasn’t.

Shannon looked down at her shoes. She wasn’t being cruel. Not this time. She was only sad, regretful, and uncertain.

“What do you really want, Shannon?”

She looked up at him. “I don’t know anymore, Rome. Maybe what I can’t have. A chance to do it all over again. I had dreams. I wanted to do more, be more than just a mother from Mooresville. Yes, I love them, but…”

She threw up her hands and looked at him. Her blue eyes were sad. They were also frustrated and accusing.

“Leaving me now won’t give you the past back.”

“Maybe I could do something else with my life. See the world. You never even wanted to go anywhere.”

“I saw enough when I was young.”

“You never even gave me the chance. There weren’t any compromises. Ever. I just did what you wanted, which was nothing.”

The river water became choppy just then. Jerome looked around nervously. He had traded farming for the river job some time ago and knew what was coming.

“Shannon…” he began.

“No. Don’t shut *me* out,” she interrupted. “You say you did everything for me. Well, I did the same for you. Yet you got your way! I got nothing. I went nowhere.”

“Shannon…”

“I did nothing! I…”

“Shannon!”

It was too late. The rain came down in buckets then. Shannon cried out and both were drenched in seconds. Jerome grabbed the paddle just as a lightning bolt flashed in the distance. Jerome began to paddle quickly. On the open water is the last place you wanted to be in a tempest.

“Go for a ride out on the river,” Shannon bit out.

“That’s the problem with women,” Jerome shot back. “Everything is someone’s fault! Nothing just happens or

is just bad luck. Wars, fights, accidents. Someone is to blame, isn't there?"

"Your idea Rome! Besides, what did you tell dad about the war? Serbians, wasn't it?"

"Tried to leave earlier," he muttered.

The rain picked up even more. The boat began to rock. Jerome had become an expert rower. But nature almost always overpowers man, even in this so called modern and advanced age.

The boat capsized. Shannon screamed as they both fell into the water. Both had cause for serious alarm. Because Shannon couldn't swim.

She'd never jumped in with the other kids and learned when they went to a well-known swimming hole in the woods. She hated the cold and wetness of it. She always wanted the warmth of the sun.

All the previous arguments now slipped away rapidly.

“Rome!” She splashed and flailed in the churning water. She was rapidly using up her energy by her panic. Her eyes met his. All the frustration and anger had given away to fear. Her eyes implored him, pleading.

There was also the slightest doubt there. A part of her, albeit a very small part, doubted if he would help. That hurt more than any words or tone ever could.

He’d show her. No, that wasn’t right. That was such a mean, spiteful thought. This was life and death. He’d show her, but not in that way. He’d prove he’d do the right thing no matter what. Even if she did leave him, it wouldn’t be in this manner.

Stop over thinking, you fool! She’s drowning!

Shannon opened her mouth to scream again but got a mouthful of water instead. She sputtered and coughed. He swam to her, and she threw her arms around his neck.

This was the typical, instinctive, and fatally flawed action of the drowning. For it often dragged the would-be rescuer down with the victim. Jerome, fortunately, knew what to do.

He pushed her arms back over his head, simultaneously pushing her to the surface, and him below. Then he swam around her, wrapped an arm around her body, and pulled her towards the shore.

She had always been a larger woman. Not obese, but not thin like women ‘should’ be, according to the trash magazines they sold at grocery and general stores. As it was, he was strong, and the water was buoyant, so

he was able to swim them both to shore using a sidestroke.

One arm pulled against the water, while the other hugged Shannon close. He held her tight enough so she couldn't wriggle around and latch onto his neck again.

Finally, they reached the riverbank. Pulling through the mud and grasses, Jerome managed to haul them both out. Both were drenched, bruised, and filthy. But alive. Shannon coughed up water, which was a good sign. She sniffled and cried, and Jerome put an arm around her. He was going to lift her up but couldn't even pull himself up. Then, they both passed out from the sheer exhaustion.

A final thunderclap jolted them back awake. The worst of the storm was over, but it was still raining. Jerome knew they would have to get up and back to the

marina office. They needed to get warm and dry as soon as possible if they didn't want to freeze.

"Shannon? Can you move?" he asked.

She nodded hesitantly. He stood up, and felt all his joints aching, protesting any further movement. Wincing in pain, he slowly lifted her to her feet. Stumbling, trying to remain balanced, they made their way through the rain to the office.

The flashing lights of a police car drowned out the regular lights. A police officer was talking to Jan. She looked up, and they saw her pointing and yelling, but couldn't hear through the glass. The officer opened the door for them.

"God! What happened? I thought you were drowning! I thought…"

Jan sputtered off and threw her arms around them. The cop went out to report that the missing persons had been found. They learned that they had been missing for several hours. The fact that they had been in the rain, unconscious and not hypothermic seemed nothing short of miraculous.

“This is the second time I should have died,” Jerome said quietly. “First the war. Now tonight.”

He shook his head and looked at Shannon.

“I’m sorry I ruined your life,” he whispered.

She put her arms around him. “No, Rome. You saved it.”

“It was my idea going out on the river.”

“I kept you from getting to shore sooner,” she countered. “I should have listened.”

The policeman scratched his head. “You need to go to the hospital?” he asked. He had been summoned to search and possibly rescue. Now though, he just felt like he was intruding on some private moment.

Jerome didn’t hear. He reached up and pushed some of Shannon’s hair behind her ear.

“You know, I forgot how pretty you really are.”

She smiled and shook her head. He kissed her forehead. The cop kept rambling.

“Nothing broken? No cuts or scratches? You’re all right?”

“I think they are,” Jan whispered.

VIII

“Wow,” I said, exhaling. “After that, I need a drink.”

I drained my glass and then ordered another.

“As the story began to unfold, I was naturally curious about Jerome and Shannon’s marriage,” Dr. Thorne said. “Obviously they were the main characters in my patient’s narrative.”

“But why?” Christopher asked. “We’ve not established yet why he was dreaming about someone else from the past.”

“Not dreaming in the conventional sense, as I said earlier. My patient never remembered them until the hypnosis brought them forward to the conscious mind. Otherwise, he seemed fairly well adjusted. His appetite was normal, and he got along with everyone.”

“Could it be…I know this is farfetched, but could it be some kind of past life experience?” Beaumont asked.

Fowler and Christopher groaned and shook their heads. I should explain to the reader that the

worldviews of those present ran a spectrum. On one end, Dr. Thorne was an atheist, while on the other, Dr. Fowler was a non-denominational minister. I was in the middle, Christopher was slightly more conservative, and Beaumont was slightly more liberal.

“Surely you aren’t becoming a universalist?” Thorne asked.

“Certainly not. Christ is Christ. Still…we don’t know everything God does, do we?”

“It is appointed once do die,” Fowler said. “From the book of Hebrews.”

“Regardless, we’re drifting off subject,” I interjected. Not the first time that’s happened when we got together. But this time, I was too intrigued by Thorne’s story to let that thread drop.

“As I said, I wanted to learn more of their marriage,” Thorne said. “The next session gave context to the storm episode.”

Jerome drove his car through the main part of Mooresville. There were a few side streets at this point, in addition to it. These mostly had other houses. The only public buildings to speak of had been the church and O’Malley’s tavern. Marketing was always done in the nearby towns, and there had never been a policeman or town council. Anything done on behalf of the whole community was decided by a meeting at church or the tavern. Utilities were provided by and billed to the county.

It wasn’t official business that drove Jerome this evening, though. It was personal. He and Shannon had had another agreement and she had stormed out. That

had been hours ago, and when she hadn’t returned, he knew she would be at her parents.

Driving by the church, Jerome saw that it was closed for the night. But Pastor’s light was on in the steeple / tower above the doors and narthex. Maybe he should try to talk to him. First, however, he’d try to talk Shannon back home.

He frowned as he pulled up to O’Malley’s. Why did he always have to be the one to apologize and beg forgiveness? Because if he didn’t, then they wouldn’t have made it this long. As chauvinistic as it sounded, his experience taught him that women forgave less than men. Their loves and their hates run far deeper.

Not that there weren’t men as well who hardened their hearts. Case in point was his father-in-law who answered the door.

“I came to take Shannon home,” he began.

“I think she’ll be staying here tonight,” he replied gruffly. “Go on back home.”

“Tell her I’m here,” Jerome replied.

“I said go home. You’ve done enough already.”

He clamped his mouth shut before he said, ‘over the years.’ He didn’t have to, because he had said it before. Every time Jerome thought their relationship might be turning a corner, it always came back to that.

“Why do you still hate me for that?” he demanded. “Have I ever not done all I could for your daughter? For your grandchildren?”

“Oh, so I should praise you for actually doing what you were supposed to do?”

He had that withering sarcasm that simultaneously put a lump in Jerome's throat and made his blood boil. Shannon had inherited it, incidentally.

"Oh, for God's sake!" he said, louder and more exasperated. He heard footsteps coming from the second floor where the family lived. No one else was there this evening, and they would hear everything. He didn't care. He was tired of them acting like he couldn't do anything right.

"How many years has that been?" Jerome continued. "Besides, Shannon had a part in it too! You act like I came home just looking for…"

"You ruined her life!"

"I'm sorry!" he shouted. Mr. O'Malley flinched and took a step back. Jerome went on, saying things he'd wanted to say for years.

“I’m sorry I came back when your son didn’t! I don’t know why! I didn’t choose it! It was a waste, the whole thing, a waste! We were killing each other over someone else’s fight! None of us should have been there. None of us should’ve died.”

He took a step forward, and Mr. O’Malley took a step back. “Jacob’s head was blown off in front of me! All right?! Why do you think the casket was sealed?! I just wanted to come home, and never leave again! Because that’s what the world does to you, when it notices you. The only thing you can do is hide from its evil!”

He slammed his fist on a table. “And you! You! Acting like I was a coward because I didn’t come home acting like Nathan Hale! Well, I’m sorry, but it wasn’t like that! Nothing good came of it! Jacob should still be

alive! Shannon should have followed her dreams. And I…I…”

He sputtered and trailed off. O’Malley turned and ran down the rows of tables. Shannon and her mother were there at the bottom of the stairs. For how long, Jerome wasn’t sure. Long enough.

O’Malley pushed past them. His wife followed him, and Shannon looked at her husband. Every emotion Jerome had ever seen in her played across her face now. The good and bad.

“Shannon…” he began.

She shook her head. “You need to go, Jerome,” she told him.

Before he could protest, she had gone upstairs to join her parents.

IX

“I’m beginning to suspect something about them,” Dr. Fowler offered.

“We all are,” I said. “But let’s reserve judgment for when Thorne has told us everything.”

Jerome was in the dark.

Outside, the sun was shining. The farmers were out in the field. His neighbors were about their business.

But he was in the dark.

Some days, the depression came on hard. The fear, the despair. The memories. Jacob’s death. The original Jacob, that is. Shannon’s brother. He’d died in France during the war. Jerome had been there. His death had been quick. He wouldn’t have been alive long enough to really experience any pain.

That was left to his comrades.

He didn’t understand why then, and he didn’t now. Where was God in that moment? It couldn’t be that He wasn’t there at all. If there was no God, then nothing mattered. Neither people nor ideas like right and wrong mattered if they were random chances. So why, then?

He didn’t know. He was in the dark.

“Rome?” Shannon called. She came into the room and looked at him with mingled dismay and irritation.

“Are you still in bed?” she demanded. “That’s all you’ve done the last two days! Stop sleeping and help your family.”

“Leave me alone.”

“Excuse me? I’ve been running after the kids, keeping the house clean, cooking your meals; thank you for not eating them.”

“So, yell at me. That’s the right thing to do.”

“Rome…”

He poked his head out. His eyes were bloodshot and haunted. Haunted with something she could never know. If nothing else, because he wouldn’t talk about it.

“I’ve had to help with the crops, on top of everything else. What’s next? Am I going to have to help dad with the hogs because Jacob and Jan don’t have extra time?”

“‘Zee peeg’s oot.’”

“Not funny. Get up.”

He didn’t.

“I can’t help you, Rome! I can’t make you happy!”

“I didn’t ask for this.”

Why couldn’t she see that? Why did she act like he was grieving her on purpose?

She slammed the door and stormed off. He was in the dark.

X

“At least they turned things around,” Christopher said. “That’s something. Life’s hard, but you have to hold on to the good when you can.”

Jerome and Jacob sat in chairs on either side of the hospital bed. Jerome’s father was breathing heavily. He had grown weaker and weaker over the last several months and eventually had reached a point where his death could no longer be postponed.

Jerome’s mother had died only months before. Jerome didn’t want to lose his other parent so soon. And yet, while he hated to admit it, he knew that his father would be happier in heaven than he now was here.

What was the proper way to look at it? Wanting to leave the world was considered reckless, if not sinful. Pastor had said once that it was a rejection of God's gifts. That despite being fallen, the world still had much beauty and blessings that it would be wrong to scorn.

Yet at the same time, death was inevitable. He of all people knew that. He had no clear answers. Pastor often said that, like Paul, they saw through a mirror dimly. Many things remained elusive and mysterious until God was seen face to face. Nor was that entirely a test, according to Pastor. He believed that human beings couldn't understand the ways of heaven any more than the blind could understand color or the deaf understand music.

"We don't understand forever," Pastor had said. "God does."

Mr. Moore's skin was cold and clammy. His breaths had taken on what the doctor had called a death rattle. That's why he had been brought to town instead of returning home in Mooresville.

Dr. Howard Phillips, the son of a well to do couple later in their lives, had converted part of his mansion to a ward for the sick and dying. Otherwise, he made house calls, and pushed the town of Oakwood to build a hospital. Later one, he would leave his fortune to do just that, and his home would become Howard Phillips retirement home.

But that was many years in the future. At the moment, the doctor came in to sit with three generations of Moores. Jerome had taken Jacob, against Shannon's wishes. For one thing, Jerome felt that his son was old enough. For another, it was snowing outside, and

Jerome hadn’t wanted to drive alone at night. Shannon had relented but still protested.

Slowly, Jerome’s father slipped away. Tears streamed down his face. Jacob looked at his father. He had never seen his father, or any other grown man, cry before.

Dr. Phillips hugged them both and said he was sorry. Perhaps that’s why Jerome felt comfortable crying. The doctor was a kind man, grandfatherly, not unlike Pastor.

“He’s home now,” Jerome said. “With mom.”

“Yes,” the doctor agreed. “But it’s always too soon.”

“I’ll have to get home,” Jerome said. “Let Pastor know.”

“If you’re going to go, then you had better go now. The snow is coming down harder. Are you sure you don’t want to stay?”

“No, thank you. I don’t want Shannon to worry.”

“All right.” He smiled at Jacob. “It’s good to see you as well, young man.”

The doctor had delivered both him and Jan.

“Are you driving yet?” Dr. Phillips asked.

“Yeah. I drove here,” Jacob told him.

“Well, be careful. It’s not a good night for anyone.”

They went outside. The bitter cold made Jerome’s tear-stained eyes sting. He wiped them as he approached their old truck. It had served them well, but the weather still worried him.

“Maybe I should drive, Jacob,” Jerome said.

“I can get it,” his son replied. “You seem, well…”

He couldn’t finish. Jerome smiled sadly. “It’s no weakness to miss your father. Or to grieve. I wish I had more when I was your age.”

He meant the war. Jacob didn’t press him, because he knew that there were things that weren’t discussed. Jacob took out the keys, climbed in the driver’s seat and started the engine. Jerome took the passenger’s side, and they drove off.

“Watch the pedestrians,” Jerome told his son. A man in grey was crossing the street.

“I see him,” Jacob answered.

They drove along in silence for a while. Thoughts of life and death went through their minds as they drove down the lonely dark stretch of road. Jacob kept his eyes on the road and a stoic expression on his face. He was

trying to appear strong, as young men did. As Jerome once had, before the war.

He glanced over at his son and felt that he was a light for him. A light in the darkness. They all were. Shannon and Jan, too. So, he would push on. He'd be a man as his son was practicing to be one. He would press on, and let God decide when it was his own time to depart.

As they neared their house, the truck's tires hit a patch of black ice. The truck began swerving back and forth. Jacob cried out, and steered left and right wildly. Jerome tried to grab the wheel and steer, for he could see his son panicking.

Jacob wrestled the wheel back over, and they barely missed hitting the front porch. Instead, they slid and hit a tree. They heard the crunch as the driver's side connected with the edge of the woods.

Jacob was unhurt; the strong steel body protected him. From the house, they could see lights turning on. Shannon and Jan ran out the front door, and around to the truck.

“I’m sorry, Pop,” Jacob said. His lip quivered and tears streamed down his face. Tears of embarrassment. Tears both frightened and grieving. Tears for his grandfather, the ones he had been trying to hold back.

“I’m sorry, Pop! I’m sorry,” Jacob wailed, sobbing now.

“It’s all right,” Jerome told him. “The truck can be replaced. You couldn’t be.”

Shannon reached the truck and pulled the door open. “Rome! Jacob! What happened? Are you hurt?”

“Ice,” Jerome told her. He left the vehicle and stood aside so Jacob could climb out through the passenger’s

side. Jacob went to his mother and let her embrace and kiss him. He was coming of age, and in between boyhood and manhood. Thus, while still trying to be an adult, sometimes he still needed to be a boy who needed his parents.

So be it, Jerome thought. He'd have plenty of time to be in adult. Not in the least because he'd survived the accident.

Jan came up and flung her arms around her brother and mother. Jerome tried his best to put his arms around all three.

"Why did you have to go tonight?" Shannon demanded.

"I just had the feeling that I wouldn't have another chance."

"Oh. Rome, is he…"

“Yes.”

“Oh. I’m so sorry. He was always good to me.”

“He loved you. He loved all of us. It was time, though. It was time.”

The family huddled together in the dark, letting their grief come. After a few minutes, they made their way back inside. Back to the warmth and comfort of life. Let coldness and death remain outside in the dark.

XI

“I should point out, that not all the recovered memories were negative,” Thorne interjected. “I know it must seem that way. But there are happy, even humorous moments, in the tale as well.”

“Jacob?”

Jerome walked around the house, looking for his son. It was market day, and he was going to drive some of the town's surplus produce into the farmer's market in Oakwood. His neighbors gave him the task of doing so, as he had one of the only cars in town.

His Ford pickup was loaded with corn, beans, squash and carrots. A trailer in the back was also loaded. He saw Zachary Applegate putting a last bushel or two in the bed. He turned and waved at him.

"Morning, Jerome. Want to take some of my stuff into town?"

"Morning. Yeah, that's fine. I'm ready to head out. Have you seen Jacob?"

"Down by the creek, most likely."

Jerome nodded and walked into the nearby woods. It was a warm sunny day, the end of summer before fall

hit. Looking up, he saw a few treetops beginning to change their colors. The sun peaked through, and a gentle breeze could be felt.

Jerome began walking down the ravine that began a few yards into the woods. It was a fairly sharp slope, one where children could nearly run up and down, but older people struggled to keep their balance. He was somewhere in the middle of that.

On rainier days, the path leading down could become a mudslide. He smiled inwardly as he remembered childhood misadventures here. Today, fortunately, the path was dry, dusty, and clear enough so as to not become entangled in briars.

At the bottom of the ravine, a small creek wound from the rocks about a mile away to the swimming hole, a pond about two miles in the other direction. The creek had a depth from a few inches to a foot or so. One of the

deeper parts ran here, near the house, and on the far side, he saw his son.

Jacob was a tall, lanky boy just having entered adolescence. In the face, he looked like his mother. Now, of course, Shannon had no time for walks in the woods. When there wasn't cooking or cleaning to be done, she would help weed and water Mooresville's crops with the men.

"Jacob," Jerome called out. "Come on. I'm getting ready to leave."

Jacob loved riding in the truck, seeing it as a rare treat. His grandfather, Mr. O'Malley, had purchased the vehicle for his daughter and son in law. He kept other people's envy in check by running errands for them, and they trusted him to sell their produce and bring back the money honestly.

“Coming, Dad!”

Jacob ran to the riverbank. Looking around, he saw two ways to get across. One was several rocks that could be used as stepping stones across the creek. The other was a large tree trunk that had fallen across the water. It was slick with mosses that still held morning dew. Jacob took one look at the log, and then climbed onto it.

“Don’t do that, Jacob,” his father called out. “Use the rocks.”

“Aw, dad.”

“You’re going to slip and fall into the creek.”

“No, I won’t!”

He walked across the log as if it were a tightrope. Unfortunately, he walked much faster than a tightrope walker. Sure enough, he slipped and hit the creek with a hard splash.

Jacob cried out, and Jerome shook his head. “Well, how about that? Dad was right about something.”

Jacob was wet and trembling, holding back tears of pain and embarrassment.

“But dad, Tarzan wouldn’t have walked on those old rocks.”

“That’s because Tarzan was brought up by apes,” Jerome replied, as he held up his hand. Pulling his son to the other side, he looked him over, and decided that nothing was broken. Just a few cuts and a lot of humiliation.

They walked up the ravine back to the house. In the kitchen, Zack and Rhiannon had brought their newborn over for the family to see.

“What happened?” Shannon asked when she saw Jacob soaking wet.

“Jungle adventure,” Jerome remarked drily. “Go on, get changed so we can go.”

“Hurry up. You’re dripping all over the floor,” Shannon complained as Jacob scampered to his room.

“And hang up your dry clothes on the line before you leave,” she called after him.

“Jungle?” Zachary asked.

“He discovered this book series in the library at Oakwood,” Jerome explained. “Tarzan of the apes. It’s about a man who lives in the jungle but is also an English lord. He can fight any man or beast, travels all over Africa, speaks multiple languages, and anything else you could want.”

Zachary snorted. “Sounds too fantastic to be worth reading.”

“Tell Jacob that.”

Years later, Oakwood would get a movie theater. Jacob would watch some of the Tarzan movies, only to wonder why his childhood hero could barely talk. Jerome, for his part, never bothered with them, and would only have a television in the retirement home.

“Look, daddy,” his daughter called out. She had been born in January, so that’s what they named her. Shannon’s dad said that that was too big a name for a little girl and called her ‘Miss Jan’ instead.

“What is it, Jan?” he asked, dropping even the ‘miss.’

“Aunt Rhiannon has a new baby.”

“So she does,” Jacob smiled. “Do you like him?”

“Yes. But he looks like he was in the bath too long.”

“So did you at that point.”

Jacob came back out, freshly dressed and with his wet clothes in his arms.

“We’ll be back hopefully before dark,” Jerome said, giving both Jan and Shannon a kiss.

“Bye, mom. Bye everyone,” Jacob said, already halfway out the door.

After hanging up the wet clothes, Jacob hopped into the truck’s passenger’s side. Jerome took the wheel, turned the ignition, and they were off. They passed the church, which had its doors open. Pastor was out, tending the flower garden he had planted by the entrance. Jerome honked his horn and waved.

They drove down the road, looking off to the side alleys to make sure no one would try to dart in front of them. The engine made it impossible not to be heard,

but the truck was still a novelty in their small village. He certainly didn't want to hit any young gawkers.

They drove past the tavern, and Jerome beeped again. Jacob cried out to his grandpa when the older O'Malley stepped out in front of his establishment. He waved at Jacob, shook his head at Jerome, and went back in.

They left town and drove through the woods on the old road. The ride was bumpy, but Jerome couldn't really complain. Only a short time ago, the road had only been an old dirt path trod by horses. Most people still travelled that way, even though he supposed that would change over the years.

Emerging from the woods that isolated Mooresville from the rest of Matheson County, they turned onto a paved road. A few miles away, they came upon Oakwood. They rode through the town square, and

Jacob looked around. People were walking around going about their business, but still looked up and waved when they saw the shiny new truck loaded with fresh produce. Between that and the beautiful weather, Jerome had high hopes for the market.

Oakwood was much larger than Mooresville, but still small as towns went. After passing through the square, they saw homesteads and farmlands of the native townspeople. The only thing that made Oakwood bigger and which would cause it to grow, as Mooresville declined, was the university.

Jerome pointed it out to his son. “There it is. Your mother used to talk about going to school there. It started as a seminary founded by Reverend Matheson. Some Mathesons still live here in town. The Reverend was one of the old Methodist circuit riders. They were

preachers who rode for miles on horseback to give their sermons."

"Did Pastor ever do that?"

"No, Pastor has always just been there at our church. Can't remember a time without him."

They pulled up to the market. Other booths were already there, so they got out to open the bed of their truck. Jerome counted the change in his wallet, while Jacob put up signs.

"Hey, pop," Jacob called out.

"Mmm?"

"Maybe I can go to the university. Since you and mom couldn't."

He smiled. "Maybe you can," he agreed. "Maybe you will."

XII

The waitress informed us that the restaurant was closing soon. Dismayed and still wanting to hear the rest of the story, we resolved to meet again the next day. For while the narrative was nothing special in and of itself, the way in which it was unfolding fascinated us.

The next evening, we met again. After ordering our meals and enjoying the complementary rolls, we asked Thorne if he was willing to continue his tale. Naturally he was and told us the next episode his patient had related under hypnosis.

Jerome sat in a chair Pastor had provided for him. Dressed in his best clothes, he would be married within the hour. Pastor sat behind his desk, looking him over.

He felt like everyone had been doing that lately. Ever since the news had gotten out. He glanced out of the window. Their church was too small to have a true parsonage, so instead, an upstairs room had been built into the front steeple, forming a small tower.

It looked over the dusty main street of Mooresville. It was a bright sunny day, and people were milling back and forth between the church and O'Malley's tavern where the reception would take place. At the moment, Shannon would be getting dressed for the ceremony, attended by both of their mothers.

He turned away and looked around Pastor's room. There was an old superstition about not seeing the bride before the ceremony. While he doubted it would make a difference at this point, why tempt fate any further?

Pastor's room only contained a small cot, his desk, the chairs, and a bookcase. Because the parish couldn't

afford much in the way of salary either, part of his compensation was a free meal any time at O'Malley's. Most of the rest of his payment was to keep up the maintenance of the church.

Pastor waited patiently for Jerome to become receptive. An older man with kind eyes and a long grey beard, Pastor had lived here for many years. The Methodist conference hadn't bothered to move him, assuming they even thought much about Mooresville period.

"So here we are," he began slowly. "I knew this day was coming."

"Yes," Pastor agreed. "Time stands still for no one."

He looked at Jerome. As a child, he had thought Pastor was one of the Old Testament prophets. He certainly looked like one.

“Pastor…I did wrong. I know that I sinned. But I’m trying to make it right. I can’t go back and change the past.”

“All true.”

“So where does that leave me with God?”

“Jerome, all have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory. That is why we needed a Savior because it’s not a simple matter of good deeds outweighing bad ones.”

“I know that. But…I mean…isn’t it possible to fall away?”

“Have you actively renounced God?”

“No, of course not. But I still sinned. I didn’t decide to ahead of time. But I did.”

“So did King David with Bathsheba. And many things that followed were premeditated. Having Uriah

killed certainly was. Yet when confronted by the prophet Nathan, he repented and then was told his sin had been taken away."

"A man after God's own heart," Jerome muttered.

"Not an ironic title. He was, except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite."

"So, you don't lose your salvation? Ever?"

"If you want more proof that no, you do not, consider the Savior's words. 'All will be forgiven except for blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.'"

"What does that even mean?'

"Christ said it about the Pharisees who accused him of being in league with the devil simply because he could cast demons out. They were so determined not to believe that he was the Messiah, they would rather believe he was evil, despite the miracles they themselves

knew of. So, it was hardheartedness, an active rejection that will be unforgiven. Unforgiven because the sinner in that case seeks no forgiveness."

Pastor stood up and put an arm on Jerome's shoulder. "That isn't you, Jerome. The very fact that you fear for your soul proves that it isn't your situation."

He gently pulled Jerome to his feet. "You have asked God's forgiveness in this matter, have you not?"

"Over and over," Jerome said, standing.

"Then trust Him. Faith is about *believing* Him as much as believing *in* Him."

They descended into the foyer. A few people were already seated. Zack was in the front row, along with his father and Rhiannon. Zack agreed to be his best man as he was an only child. Thankfully, he had not made any

sarcastic remarks. Jerome admitted that they had gotten along better after the war.

“I’ve been talking with dad,” Jerome told Pastor as they walked up to the altar. “He says we can build a house past his. There by the woods. I can keep working with him on our land. He’ll split the food and surplus money with us.”

“You’ll be taking care of your family,” Pastor agreed. “All of them.”

They reached the front of the sanctuary. Zack and Rhiannon stood on either side of them. His dad went to the front door of the church and opened it. The guests began to come in, greeted with handshakes from the father of the groom. Mrs. O’Malley walked up the aisle and sat at the piano. His own parents took their seats in front when everyone else was in.

Mrs. O’Malley began playing a hymnal as a prelude. Jerome swallowed hard. This was it. Was he ready? Was anyone ever ready?

The piano music changed to the wedding march. All the guests stood and faced the front door of the church. Mr. O’Malley led Shannon to her soon to be husband. She was dressed in a beautiful flowing dress that couldn’t hide the fact that she was also several months pregnant.

XIII

“I thought that was what had happened,” I remarked. Our entrées came, and after we said our prayers, began to eat. Thorne didn’t pray of course but remained respectful and waited until we were finished. As we began to eat, he resumed.

Jerome sat with his parents by the fire. It had been a cold rainy day and they hadn't had much to do. After dinner, they sat in silence.

Jerome wondered where to go from here. He had seen things, terrible things while away in France. They still haunted him. Maybe they always would.

He hadn't dreamed since returning home. Or rather, he hadn't had a dream that he could remember. In the months since returning home, there had been several nights where he found himself awake in the middle of the night. He had been soaked with sweat and felt like he had been dreaming of combat. But he could recall no details. Perhaps it was better that way. The things he remembered were bad enough.

A pounding on the door jolted them out of their sleepy musings. Mr. Moore got up to answer it. Mr.

O’Malley stood there, and he looked past Jerome’s father into the house.

“O’Malley?” his father asked.

“Is your son here?” O’Malley demanded. He answered his own question when he saw the young man. Their eyes met, and Jerome tensed up.

He knew.

“Is something wrong?” his mother asked. She stood up and so did Jerome.

“Yes, there is. Let me in.”

Mr. Moore stood aside so he could enter, not quite understanding what was going on. Mrs. Moore put her hands on her son’s arm and shoulder. Without being consciously aware of it, she sensed that their guest’s hostility was directed at Jerome.

Mr. O’Malley, fighting to keep his temper, folded his arms and began to speak.

“Shannon has been ill lately,” he began.

“Oh, that’s terrible,” Mrs. Moore said.

“I took her into town. To the doctor,” Mr. O’Malley interrupted. “She’s going to be a mother.”

His parents’ jaws both dropped. Slowly they turned to Jerome. He blushed with embarrassment, guilt and shame.

“She says there’s only one possible father,” O’Malley told them. “Well, boy? Are you going to be a man and tell me the truth?”

Jerome swallowed and felt like retching. He had felt guilty about the night he came home as it was. Now, he felt the world crashing down around him yet again.

During the war, he had survived and kept himself sane by thinking of home. Get through it and then come home. Never leave again. Home is safe. Home has no surprises.

Until it did.

“It’s true,” Jerome said. He saw no value in denying it. That wasn’t fair to Shannon. Shannon his friend. Shannon his companion all throughout childhood. Shannon, the mother of his child.

“Oh Jerome.” His mother’s dismay and disappointment hurt more than Mr. O’Malley’s anger.

“How? When?” his father asked, dumfounded and still processing it all.

“The night I came home,” Jerome told them. “We left the party early. I…I… don’t know what happened. I mean, I do, I mean…”

He trailed off, and his father shook his head. “We taught you better. You’re a Christian man, aren’t you?”

“Of course I am! I just…we just… we were hurting. We wanted to feel something good.”

“Feelings?” Mr. O’Malley took a step forward. Mr. Moore stood between him and Jerome. If he hadn’t, O’Malley would have attacked him. He still did, albeit verbally.

“What do feelings have to do with right and wrong?”

“I didn’t mean for it to happen! It just did.”

“Shut up! You used her!”

Tears streamed down his face. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Well, what are you going to do about it? My daughter is a good girl.”

“I’ll take care of her,” Jerome quickly promised. “And the baby. I’ll do the right thing. She won’t be disgraced.”

“Okay, O’Malley?” Mr. Moore asked. “Okay? Jerome owns up to it. Let’s just calm down. What’s done is done. Beating him won’t change that.”

With a herculean effort, Mr. O’Malley unballed his fists.

“No,” he admitted. “It won’t. But it would sure *feel* good.”

With that last barb, he turned and left, slamming the door behind him.

Mr. Moore sighed and walked over to his wife and son. They embraced, anguished, confused and frightened.

XIV

“That makes me wonder if Jerome really loved Shannon,” Beaumont remarked. “At least at first. He did later on, as we’ve heard, but still.”

“It illustrates how different sins or actions are viewed in different times,” Fowler offered. “Particularly things like fornication, adultery and lust. In the last century, they were seen as almost unforgivable. Now they are just glossed over. I’ve always felt that the truth was in the middle. Sin is real, but so is a Savior. ‘Neither do I condemn you’. But ‘go out and sin no more.’”

“The Pastor in the account seems to have felt the same way you do,” I said. “You and he would have probably been friends.”

Fowler smiled slightly, and Christopher spoke up.

“Well, moderation has been touted as a cornerstone of virtue since at least Aristotle. But people are more prone to taking extremes on issues because it’s easier than thinking through things.”

“True. Not everything is black and white,” Thorne said.

“Neither is everything gray,” Christopher replied. “The truth is that some things are black and white, and some are gray. In a gray area, you still must determine which choice is closer to the light than to the dark.”

“Fanatics take the extreme of nothing being gray,” Fowler said. “The lukewarm take the extreme that everything is.”

“Human behavior is a tough knot to unravel,” Thorne said. “Whether Jerome loved Shannon before

their marriage, I don’t know. He did eventually. And before their…dalliance, they did care for each other, as the next few parts of the story reveal.”

The train to Oakwood pulled up to the station. Only two passengers disembarked: Jerome and Zachary. Three boys from Mooresville had left two years ago, drafted into the Great War. After the armistice, and occupation, two were coming home.

Jacob hadn’t made it.

Don’t think about it. Don’t think about how he died. The only thing worse than being killed in action had been dishonorable discharge. Especially if said discharge was due to mental breakdown. He had learned that early on.

He had contracted trench fever at one point. For about a month, he had lived in a hospital. There had been men there, men shattered not physically but mentally. He fought to get better as soon as possible. Then, he fought hard never to get back to the hospitals. Never to be broken as those men were.

No. Don't think about it. Build a wall, build a dam against the flow of memory. Never dream; don't even imagine. Complete your service and when they allow you, return home. Never leave again. Stay quiet. Stay safe.

Zachary had teased him when he returned from the hospital. As always, Jacob told him to back off. As always, Jacob had been focused on the mission.

Then Jacob died.

Zachary hadn’t been close enough to really see anything. But Jerome had. He had been close enough.

No. Don’t think about it.

“You all right?” Zachary asked.

Jerome steeled his nerves. He nodded once. They began walking down the road. Mooresville was only a few miles away.

Zachary was smiling and beginning to whistle before they had disembarked. He had shaved and dressed in his best uniform. He had wanted to make the best impression possible on Rhiannon.

He had written as often as he could to her. Sentimental, gushing things that had no doubt made the younger O’Malley girl squeal with delight. For while Shannon’s younger sister had been admittedly prettier, she had also been far sillier.

Jerome had only written a letter or two. What was there to say? He prayed that life here had continued as it had for over a century: simple, honest and busy. He, meanwhile, had been in the trenches. And would his loved ones have really wanted to know what that was like?

What could they do about it? He never doubted that they had been praying for him. Outside of that, there had been nothing more to do for him.

They rounded a bend and walked through the woods. It was a crisp clear night. The moon and stars provided plenty of light to see by until they reached the dozens of flat acreages in the wood's middle that contained Mooresville.

There were lights, oil lamps and candles, in the windows of the village. O'Malley's tavern had the most and they heard talking and laughing as they stepped into

town. The people would all be waiting for them, to welcome them home.

Mooresville would be a candle holding back the darkness for him. He would never leave its light again. That he promised himself.

Zachary knocked on the tavern door. There was a hush inside. The two now ex-soldiers looked at each other and opened the door.

They walked into the tavern’s main room. Sure enough, Mr. O’Malley stood in front of the whole town. They shouted “Surprise!” and began singing that they were jolly good fellows.

This was followed by loud applause. Zachary shouted and whooped his appreciation. Jerome waved and smiled without showing his teeth. Their mothers

came up to embrace the sons that had been protected by God and were now home.

“I’m all right, mom,” Jerome whispered into his mother’s ear. Not entirely true, but what else could he say?

No. Don’t think about it.

“Boys, your money is no good here,” Mr. O’Malley told them, grinning ear to ear. “Dinner’s on me!”

He led the two younger men through the crowd. They received more hugs, clasped shoulders and back slaps from their fathers and the others. Jerome saw Mrs. O’Malley and her daughters. They were smiling too, but their faces conveyed bittersweetness. Their boy hadn’t come back and while they were happy that no one else in town would have that experience, it still hurt.

Shannon and Rhiannon approached them. Zachary didn't hesitate. He gathered Rhiannon up in his arms and kissed her. More shouts and applause followed.

"You look very handsome, Zack," Rhiannon said, flushed from the kiss.

"I know," he said, with a grin and a wink. Indeed, he embodied the spirit of America triumphant in his manner and impeccable dress. Jerome had his uniform pants on and his overcoat, but he was otherwise more plainly dressed. Their suitcases had been put on the wrong train and wouldn't arrive for a few more days.

"Hello Rome," Shannon said.

Jerome embraced her but didn't say anything. He had thought about what he would say when he faced her family. How they would react to the truth that Jacob was

gone. He had wanted to say the right thing but had no idea what that would be.

He realized that he couldn't explain why the loss had happened. Even if he could, what then? To explain was not to explain away. That was why traditional platitudes and consolations sounded so hollow. For while not wrong, they didn't take away the pain. Even if the mind knew exactly why, the emotion still had to come.

"Before we eat, may I say a prayer?" Pastor spoke up. When the noise calmed down, their ageing preacher began.

"Dearest Lord Father, we thank you for protecting our children and bringing them home. Though one of them has not, we know he is with you. You have called his grandfather, another Christian soldier home as well. We know that they stand before you, blameless in your eyes, for they knew our Lord Jesus. We thank you and

we praise you. Let us honor them by living as you would have us live. Bless this food and the hands that made it. So, say we all, amen."

"Amen," everyone repeated.

Then came the dinner O'Malley had prepared. Roast pork from his own raised hogs, potatoes from the fields, and wheat beer brewed here in town. Now that they were men, they were allowed to drink it.

It wasn't bad. They had, of course, already sampled various beers and wines in France and Germany. He had experienced the pleasure of intoxication and the pain of the next day. He soon learned restraint and moderation, for he saw others around him who overindulged. Their bodies and minds, in the long run, had suffered more than they had from the memories they were trying to obliterate. That was another way to get a dishonorable discharge.

No. Don’t think about it.

“So, boys,” Mr. O’Malley said, as the meal was being consumed. “Tell us everything.”

“Like what, sir?” Jerome asked.

“Well, you know. Your battles. Your exploits.”

Jerome swallowed. “Well…one day was like any other, I guess. Crouching in a trench and hoping to get a shot at the enemy edgewise.”

“Of course. But what else? What about Jacob?”

Jerome’s knuckles whitened as he clutched his beer. “He was there with us. We were together, the whole time. We did our duty.”

He looked up at O’Malley. “I’m sorry.”

He looked around the room. It had fallen into silence. The faces of friends and family were slowly

losing their smiles. This was not what they had expected. They wanted to be regaled with thrilling accounts of action and adventure. Something along the lines of the Alamo or Yorktown. Tales that would rival the Greeks taking Troy or of David slaying Goliath.

But Jerome wasn't delivering and some of them were getting bewildered, disappointed and even irritated. Mr. O'Malley was turning into the latter. Still, he gave Jerome one more chance.

"But what did you *do* there? How did you fight? What was that like?"

Jerome took a drink of his beer, fighting to keep his hand steady as he did. Don't think about it. Don't think about it.

He looked in his drink for several moments, hoping to find an answer there. There wasn't, but he already

knew that. He sighed and told what he had been telling himself about the whole affair.

“Well…I don’t know. Americans, British and French were killing Germans because a Serbian murdered an Austrian. Somehow, that became our problem.”

Mr. O’Malley frowned, and Zachary spoke up.

“Jerome’s just being modest, everyone,” he said. Standing up, he made a sweeping gesture.

“Imagine. A land, once green and good, burned up and grey with fire and ash. Armies with rapid fire guns so fast, and so deadly, that the only way to keep everyone from dying was to dig deep into the scorched earth.”

They listened, hopeful.

“Digging down, we had our food, our guns, and our lives. Above, in between, was barbed wire and empty shells. Germans fighting to blow us up. Day and night,

we stood and returned fire. None us of could, or even wanted to sleep long. Because we had a job to do."

The people began to relax and murmur approval. This was more like it. Zachary continued, weaving a spell of words through his enraptured audience.

"No man's land, it was," Zachary continued. "Between the trenches was a land of the dead that the devil himself would hesitate to cross. But we did. We would draw their fire until they had to reload. Then we'd inflict wounds on their ranks. The freedom of Europe, no the whole world, was in our hands."

"Yes?" Mr. O'Malley asked. "Yes?"

Zachary took a sip of beer and then continued, smiling proudly.

"Your Jacob was always the leader of the charge, Mr. O'Malley. Every time. He died because he couldn't be

wounded. Or captured. Or scared away. No whining or pleading from him, no sir!”

The people applauded and cheered. Mr. O’Malley, his eyes misting, quickly bounded over and wrapped Zachary in a bear hug.

“God bless you, boy!” he said, above the others. “God bless you!”

The party went on for hours after that. More food was eaten, and more toasts raised. Zachary told tale after tale of bravery and daring. At some point, Rhiannon had found her way onto his lap. Between stories, he’d find time to give her kisses and caresses. Mr. O’Malley didn’t seem to mind at all.

Jerome silently watched as Zachary gave them what he could not. Then, as the town began singing ‘Over there’ and ‘Pack up your troubles,’ he resolved to leave.

Looking around, he saw that even his parents weren't paying him a lot of attention. They were all focused on the glory and honor of the war.

He stood and quietly made his way out the door. The night had gotten colder, despite the warmth within. He walked across the road to the church and entered the cemetery. By the moonlight, he read the names and found Jacob's next to Old O'Malley, his grandfather. He had cheered them when they boarded the train, two years and a lifetime ago.

"We all made it home, Jacob," he said aloud. "But we didn't all make it alive."

"Rome?"

He turned around, surprised. Shannon was walking up to him. Care and concern were in her eyes.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

“Nothing. Nothing now.”

“You didn’t write me hardly at all.” Her tone had a scolding quality.

“I had nothing to say,” he told her. “Besides, what could you do? What could anyone do?”

“You could have been more civil to dad,” she said. “He’s been devastated ever since we got the news.”

She pointed at her brother’s grave. “We all have. This is the first day in months that mom hasn’t cried.”

“I’m sorry.”

“That’s all you’ve said to anyone. Why didn’t you want to talk to anybody? You’re nicer than that.”

“Only when I was young, Shannon.”

“You still are.”

“I’ll never be young again.”

And he truly felt that. Yes, physically he was far from old age. But after what he'd seen, how could he…

No. Don't think about it.

He walked past Shannon back to the road. She tried to take his arm, but he shook it off and kept walking. He planned on heading for home. He wanted to sleep. Sleep for hours or for days; it didn't matter. He wanted to be alone. Now would be a good time, while even his parents were back there, reveling in glory.

Shannon followed him. "Rome, talk to me! Tell me what's wrong. You can tell me."

"No, I can't," he said, still walking. He didn't even turn his head. Instead, he focused on home. "You don't understand."

"Then explain it to me."

"Go home. Zachary's saying what you want to hear."

“He’s lying?”

Jerome sighed and slowed down as they reached his parent’s door. “No. Not exactly. I’m sure that’s how he really remembers it.”

“But what about you? Shannon asked. “What about my brother? Did you see him die?”

He turned and looked at her. She saw pain and anguish in his eyes.

“Yes.”

“How?”

“Don’t. Shannon, please! Don’t make me talk about it. Just go away! Leave me alone.”

“But…”

“I’m wounded, all right? No, I wasn’t shot. I’m wounded because of everything else. Everything I saw. I

was spared, for some reason. But please, don’t make me relive it. I’m too damaged.”

He opened the door and went in, shutting it in her face as he did. Shannon, angry, began pounding on the door. After being away so long, she was not about to let him brush her aside.

“You’re not the only one who’s damaged!” she shouted. “Do you hear me, Jerome Moore? Don’t tell me I don’t know anything about it!”

He didn’t answer, so she banged on the door again. After a few moments, he opened it.

He was about to tell her to leave again, but she then threw herself at him. He staggered to remain standing. She broke down, sobbing into his chest. He put his arms around her. She returned his embrace, hitting his back with her fists.

“I’m sorry,” he stammered. “Shannon…”

She looked up and saw him crying too. She read something more in his eyes. A haunted look that she realized she really couldn’t understand. What she did understand in that moment, was that whatever glory he had gained in war had its price. There would be wounds that would never heal. That, having seen war, a warrior could never be able to take anything for granted again.

“Rome…”

He leaned in and kissed her. Not on the forehead this time. They both cried in each other’s arms. Then she kissed him back.

“You know, I forgot how pretty you are,” he told her.

“You should have written more,” she told him. “I’ve missed you so. I love you.”

They kissed again. Then, he pulled her inside.

XV

“I may be taking a page out of your book, Thorne,” Christopher said. “But could it be that this amnesiac is remembering something from his own life that’s fueling the Jerome story? Maybe he’s a veteran, not of World War I, but of one of the more recent wars. Or maybe he had a difficult marriage.”

“Then why wouldn’t he simply remember his own life?” I asked. “Why someone else’s?”

“We don’t know that he is. Yes, there was a Mooresville, and yes, there was a Jerome. But we don’t know if this was his real life or not. So, what do you think, Thorne?”

“That’s not impossible,” the psychiatrist admitted. “But usually, a delusion has more of the person’s life in it than this. Remember, Mooresville is long gone.”

“So maybe he lived in a similar place,” Christopher replied. “Indiana is full of places like Mooresville. Out of the way small towns and rural areas that have barely changed in the last fifty years.”

“Logical. And in other cases, I would probably agree. But that’s not the case here. I’m certain of that.”

War had come to the world. In the last few decades, especially in the wake of Napoleon, the nations of Europe went forth to bring more land, people, and wealth under their control. Patriotism ran high, as did jealousies and rivalries. Nations formed alliances and weapons were built. When weapons are built, people wish to use them. They got their chance when an ill-timed assassination lit the fire that blazed across the continent.

War had come to America. President Woodrow Wilson resolved to stay out of the European conflict. He almost succeeded. But the aggression of German U boats on the high seas against even neutral vessels reached a point where it couldn't be ignored. Soon, America's young men found themselves embroiled in a fight for their very lives.

War had come to Mooresville. Throughout the land, even in its most remote parts, the call went up for brave young men to defend the liberty of their ancestor's homelands. Never mind that they had never seen them before. Never mind that as many Americans were of German descent as they were of English, Irish and French.

Jerome, Zachary and Jacob, three of Mooresville's finest, answered the call one fateful day. Their main inspiration had been Jacob's grandfather. The O'Malley

patriarch had been one of the last surviving Civil War veterans in the state. Indiana had been a free state. The only battle fought on Hoosier soil had been a skirmish at Corydon by Morgan's raiders.

But then, as now, young men from Indiana had answered the call. Hoosiers joined the Union's ranks and had died at Gettysburg. Hoosiers had spilled their blood in the south.

"Hoosiers fought with honor," old O'Malley told them.

The three newest Allied soldiers were having a farewell dinner in the tavern. Pastor had led them in a prayer, and the town had come to wish them well. Old O'Malley had been dominating the conversation.

"Yes sir, we fought for freedom then, and you will fight for it now." Old O'Malley was shorter than the

average man, but compact and wiry. Thin wisps of gray hair lined his bald head, and a gray beard draped his front, almost hiding the buttons of his overalls. He had old shoes nearly worn through, and his hands and feet had the calluses of a man who worked the land for decades. But he had all his teeth, most of his mind, and a gleam in his blue eyes that bordered on the fanatical. Never a man to doubt the truth of his thoughts was old O'Malley. In particular, he felt certain that war was by far the best way to acquire virtue.

"Like Joshua, we went forth to conquer the heathen," old O'Malley went on. "Like Moses, we led the enslaved to the Promised Land. Yes, men fought and died with honor, courage and truth. None may stand against the enemies of God. The Egyptians, the rebels, and now the so-called Central Powers. All stand against the gifts of freedom bestowed by God. All their houses

have or will fall. And great are the ruin of those houses!”

“We do pray for a speedy return, though,” Pastor added. “We pray for peace, not bloodshed. We hold fast to the promises of Jesus, who is the Prince of Peace.”

Old O’Malley cocked his head and eyed Pastor headlong. A faint scar on old O’Malley’s temples became especially visible whenever he did this. He had been wounded at some point, but could no longer remember if it was at Gettysburg, or elsewhere. Some tellings of the story put him and his company against General Jackson. Other times, he claimed to have seen General Lee in the flesh and shot at him. What did remain consistent, however, was his unwavering pride in his service.

“Amen pastor. Amen. But God brings great good out of everything. Even human sin. Is it not so? Are not courage and fortitude good things? Or integrity? Or

simple manliness? How'd we ever get these if not in war? What of David, or Joshua, or Samson? Fighting men, all of them. Even Jesus himself returns one day to make war. He'll crush the serpent's head under his heel that day. Make no mistake."

"Still, we pray for our boys to return safely," Pastor insisted.

Old O'Malley grunted and ordered a round of drinks for the adults. "Don't worry, boys," he said with a smile. "When you return home, you'll be men too. Then, we'll have a drink together."

He toasted them and led a chorus of the Battle Hymn of the Republic. Mr. O'Malley smiled and put a hand on his old father's shoulder. Shannon, Rhiannon and their mothers looked sheepish as they handed milder libations to the three soldiers.

When it was time for them to leave, Zachary kissed Rhiannon and promised that he'd write her every day.

Shannon looked at Jerome. "You'll write me too, won't you Rome? To let me know you're all right?"

"Of course, I will," he said. "We'll be back soon. Don't you worry."

They hugged, but Jerome felt a little self-conscious, so he only kissed her forehead. She smiled and blushed slightly. Then the two joined Jacob O'Malley in leaving the tavern. It would be a simple walk to Oakwood's train station. From there, they'd be sent to Louisville, to wherever they were assigned for basic training, and then on to Europe.

They walked along, humming the Battle Hymn to themselves. Jerome for one moment did feel a pang of doubt. What if really wasn't all honor and glory? True,

that’s all old O’Malley talked about. Yes, he was the only person they had never known who had actually gone to war. But still…

XVI

“I can relate to that,” I commented. “We have this idea that war is something romantic. And sometimes, it must happen. If our parents hadn’t fought Hitler, where would we be?”

“You fought in Vietnam a few years ago,” Fowler remembered. “We all prayed for you, hopefully as much as Pastor did for his young friends.”

“Well, I’m still here, so you prayed enough,” I said, prompting them all to chuckle.

“Still, most people don’t appreciate the ugly side of war unless they’ve seen it firsthand,” Thorne said. “A lot of young men do come back, traumatized. Especially from Vietnam, where so many didn’t support the war, and took it out on our soldiers.”

“I remember the hippies,” I said. “Among other things. Thanks for talking it through with me at the time.”

Thorne nodded and made a dismissive gesture that said he’d have done so anyway.

“Jerome’s service was apparently a large part of his life,” Beaumont said. “But not the only part. Since your patient described Jerome’s coming home and then going off to war, I take it no other session really went into detail about his wartime experience?”

“No,” Thorne confirmed. “All the episodes under hypnosis described times at or around Mooresville.”

Summer had come, and with that, the hot afternoon sun. After a morning of weeding and watering, Jerome and Shannon took a walk in the woods. On a leash, Jerome’s mongrel, Sparky, pulled him forward, wagging his tail and panting. He loved his walk through the woods and Jerome tried to take him down to the creek and back every day.

“The corn and beans are doing well,” Jerome told Shannon.

“Jacob had to shoot a couple of rabbits in our garden.”

Jacob was her older brother. Despite only being a year or so older than Jerome, he was already allowed to

go hunting. He had done a pretty good job of chasing the rabbits out of the fields.

Shannon made a face. “He came in holding up these two bunnies like it was a trophy. Rhiannon cried, and he got scolded, but we still had to eat rabbit stew.”

“You think they’re cute, but they eat everything,” he said. “Little thieves.”

“Well, I still didn’t want to see them all bloody and dead. And don’t you say I’m just a girl.”

“Me? Never.”

He grinned and led the way into the woods. The fields ended abruptly, giving way to beeches, oaks and poplars. The ground was dry due to no excessive rainfall lately. Squirrels scampered about and birds called from the treetops.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” a voice called out. They looked up and saw Zachary Applegate smirking at them.

“What do you want?” Jerome demanded. The two boys didn’t get along. There were often fights and scuffles. Sometimes one boy won, and sometimes the other. Jerome really didn’t feel like messing with him today.

“This is my woods. So, you stay out.”

“I don’t see your name on them,” Shannon retorted. She walked up to him, put her hands on her hips, and glared at him. She was good sized for a girl, strong and big boned. Furthermore, being a girl, Zack couldn’t hit her, and they both knew it.

Zachary took out his pocketknife, carved his name on a tree, and then walked past her. Deliberately

slamming into Jerome's shoulder, he left. Soon, they heard him singing loudly, something about him and Shannon sitting in a tree.

"Come on, Sparky," Jerome said.

They kept walking deeper into the woods. The ground grew steeper, and they walked down into the ravine. Luckily, it was dry and they didn't have to worry about slipping down the slope. That had happened before.

At the bottom of the ravine, a small creek flowed gently by. Sparky jumped in and began to drink the water. They let him splash for a minute before walking on. After about half a mile, the creek widened and deepened into a swimming hole. They saw that Jacob was already there, splashing around. Sparky jumped and waged his tail. Jerome took off the leash and followed his dog into the water.

“Come on in,” Jerome called to Shannon.

“I’m not getting wet,” she shouted. “Especially not in front of you, Jerome Moore!”

The two boys and the dog played for a while. Then they heard shouting.

“Jacob! Shannon! Lunch!”

“It’s grandpa,” Shannon said.

“He could wake the dead,” Jerome muttered. Old O’Malley intimidated him with his wild eyes, loud voice and constant Civil War stories.

After getting out and enduring the dog’s shaking off water, they made their way back up to the ravine. When they passed the tree where Zachary had carved his name, Jerome got out his own pocketknife. Below the name, he carved the words ‘loves Rhiannon O’Malley.’ Shannon covered her mouth to stifle a laugh.

They emerged from the woods and walked through the fields. Some of the adults were still working to finish their chores before the afternoon sun. Old O'Malley, standing in the tavern door, complained that in the army, they would be digging latrines if they kept the officer waiting this long.

As it turned out, the prank Jerome had pulled on Zachary had backfired. The next Sunday at church, he walked in arm in arm with the younger O'Malley girl. When Zachary saw Jerome looking at him, he smirked and kissed Rhiannon's cheek.

XVII

"Living well is the best revenge," Beaumont offered.

"Not that I'm tiring of the story, Thorne," Fowler said. "But I can't imagine it going on much longer."

“No. There’s only a few more episodes,” Thorne confirmed.

The sun rose over the fields of Mooresville. Already, the farmers were out. The day before, the Applegates, who had the oxen, plowed the fields. The other farmers descended on the fields now with their seeds and tools.

Jerome had a bundle of corn seeds in his hand saved from the previous season. Through winter, they waited for their moment to grow. Now, the day had come.

Jerome’s father dug a small trench. At the proper distances, Jerome dropped seeds. Every few drops, he would grab a garden hoe to scrape the dirk back over them. Other farmers would be planting tomatoes, beans or squash. His mother and the rest of the wives would

be gathering water from the creek and setting up their rain barrels.

The tranquil morning was interrupted by squeals, both human and animal. Jerome looked up in the direction of the O'Malley tavern. O'Malley raised and butchered hogs for the patrons. He also brewed his own beer from the wheat and barley he bought at market. Mooresville was mostly known locally for its corn.

Rhiannon O'Malley ran off. At her heels was no cute piglet. It was a huge, full-blown hog. Rhiannon was supposed to feed them their slop. But she was afraid of their size and the aggression with which they attacked their meals.

The hog ran into the woods. From the tavern, Rhiannon's grandmother poked her head out the door.

"Rhiannon! The pig's out!"

While most of the O'Malleys were of Irish stock, Mr. O'Malley's mother was the child of German immigrants. She was short, stout and still had the trace of a German accent. As a result, 'the pig's out' sounded more like 'zee peeg's oot.

"Jacob! Shannon! Help your sister. Zat peeg is loose again!"

Several of the men chuckled. Jerome's father nudged him.

"Why don't you help them, Jerome?" he asked. "I don't think Rhiannon O'Malley is cut out for wrangling."

"What about the planting?"

"We'll be done soon. After that, it's just the three w's."

"Weed, water and wait."

“Farming’s not for the impatient.”

Father and son exchanged a smile. Then Jerome ran up to the other children.

“I can help,” he told them.

“Thanks,” Jacob said. He handed a rope to Shannon. “You can go with Shannon. I’ll take Rhiannon the other way. Come on.”

Jacob led his sniffling sister into one part of the woods. Shannon and Jerome took another path. Chances were they would be the ones to find it. Jacob would be too busy trying to calm Rhiannon.

They heard a rustle. At first, they thought it was the hog. Instead, another boy, Zachary Applegate, emerged. He had been putting out traps lately, and now was carrying a dead raccoon with a look of smug triumph.

“What are you doing here?” Jerome asked.

“What does it look like?” Zachary replied. He grinned and waved the carcass in front of them. Shannon cried out and batted it away.

“Cut it out!” she told him.

“We’re looking for a hog,” Jerome told him.

Zachary snorted. “That stuff’s easy.”

“Yeah, yeah. Get out of the way, would you?”

He did but waved the raccoon in front of them first. Jerk. Jerome noted that he never pulled any stunts like that with Rhiannon, even though the other O’Malley girl was far more squeamish than Shannon.

After a few minutes, they heard the snorting and snuffling of the hog. It had found some wild berries and was munching on them. The two children came up to it slowly.

Jerome grabbed its front hooves and tried to pull it forward. The pig squealed and nipped him. Jerome jerked back with a cry.

“Not that way, silly,” Shannon admonished him. She took the rope and slowly put it around the pig’s neck and then handed the rope to Jerome. He pulled on it. While he did so warily, not wanting to make it mad, the pig didn’t move until Shannon slapped its backside. In this way, walking together, they brought the hog back to its pen.

XVIII

“We still don’t know why were getting an account of Jerome Moore’s life,” Christopher said.

“If not his own past, or trying to say something that he’s suppressed, what then?” I asked. “We’ve ruled out reincarnation…”

“No, we haven’t,” Beaumont replied.

“Or is he some kind of prophet?” Fowler wondered. “Is this clairvoyance? And if so, why in reverse?”

“Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Jerome stood with the other children of the congregation as they recited the 23rd Psalm. Pastor had been getting them to memorize it for just such a Sunday. During the week, they were busy with farm chores, but a few evenings a week and Sunday afternoons, Pastor taught them as best he could with the books he had.

They had learned to read and write. He had also taught them extended passages out of the scriptures. The Bible, he maintained, was an education in itself.

After they finished their memory work, the congregation applauded, and they went back to their seats. He was taken by the hand and led to his pew by one of the girls, a pretty redheaded girl named Shannon.

“Pick up your feet,” she whispered, giving his hand a little slap. She was cute, but a little bossy.

They sat between their parents and settled in to hear Pastor’s sermon. He liked Pastor but hoped that the sermon wouldn’t go on too long. Why did adults have to talk for what seemed like hours on end?

He tried to listen. Pastor was saying something about Solomon and vanity. He looked around. All of the adults paid attention. Of course, Shannon was paying

attention, too. Or at least, she was sitting still. The other boys were fidgeting, however, so he was happy that he at least wasn’t the only one.

A sunbeam shined through the front door of the church. Pastor and the pulpit were illuminated as though God Himself was smiling down on him. Jerome wondered briefly if God ever got bored.

He stretched and noticed that when he did, he briefly cast a shadow over the pulpit. Curious, he waved his hand over it again.

Shannon looked over and smacked his hand. “Stop it,” she whispered.

He did for a few minutes. Then slowly, warily, he stuck his hand up again. He tried to make a shadow puppet and found he could make one that resembled a bird. He moved his hand up and down, to mime a bird

pecking at Pastor's head. He never noticed, but others did, and began to look around. Jerome put his hand down whenever anyone looked in his direction.

Once no one was looking, he put his shadow puppet back up and commenced pecking. He heard a few snickers, mostly from the other kids. Shannon smacked his hand again.

"I'm going to tell," she warned in a low voice.

It turned out that she didn't have to. Jerome's mother switched places with one of the other children and sat right by him. She held his hand and shook her head. He'd been caught.

Well, at least he'd gotten a few laughs for his trouble. Even Shannon had been forced to admit later that it had been a good joke.

XIX

“Or maybe memories are attached to matter,” I commented, somewhat facetiously. “Maybe ‘visions of past lives’ are simply because our bodies contain atoms previously in other bodies. Matter and energy aren’t created or destroyed. Only changed in form. Well then? What we’re made of has been in other people and things before. And will be again after we die.”

“Rather esoteric, wouldn’t you think?” Thorne asked, smiling.

“That has nothing to do with whether something is true or not,” Beaumont pointed out.

“No,” Thorne admitted. “And it’s still a natural explanation, albeit an obscure and bizarre one. Clairvoyance, pantheism, or near-death experiences are in the spiritual, if not occult realm.”

“Something tells me you don’t think that it’s that simple?” I guessed, seeing his face.

Thorne sighed. “Sadly, nothing ever is.”

Mr. and Mrs. Moore were seated in the front row of church. Baby Jerome sat on his mother’s lap. Today was the day for his baptism.

Mrs. Moore smiled radiantly on her son. And she reflected on how far things had come since this time last year she had given birth to a stillborn infant, and it had devastated her.

For months, she had grieved. Both alone and with her husband. She had been angry and demanded of Pastor the reason why. Pastor hadn’t known, but had assured her that God, who sees all, will bring the faithful through.

Now, the proof of his words was here in her lap. Pastor called them up and asked the usual questions about renouncing the spiritual forces of wickedness and their commitment to Christ. She answered all the questions with the usual responses. And meant them. God hadn't failed them. Her new son was proof.

"Jerome Moore, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," Pastor said, sprinkling his tiny head with water.

She still felt a tug at her heart for the other. But now, it felt bittersweet, not gut wrenching. Her other child was with God. Pastor had told her so, and she believed him. But Jerome, he lived and would grow into a man and live a full life. This she knew. The Lord was faithful.

XX

“The final session I had a few days before I brought the tale to your attention,” Thorne said.

“The patient came in and right away I could see that something had changed. He seemed more confident, more sure of himself, than he had been before.

‘Doctor, there’s no need for hypnosis,’ he said.

‘Why is that?’ I asked.

‘Because I remember what I had dreamed last night.’

‘And what was that?’

‘I was in a bed in a small room. It was like a hospital room I thought. Until I realized that it was actually where I lived. It was my home at Harold Phillips. I am Jerome Moore.’

“He paused, to let that sink in. I was obliged to tell him that I had, in fact, looked up the name Jerome Moore. I told him that while Mr. Moore was a real person, he had died years ago.

“‘So, you see,’ I told him. ‘There’s no way you and he are the same person. You aren’t a ghost. You’re alive, and relatively healthy, despite the amnesia.”

“‘But I don’t have amnesia anymore,’ he replied. ‘I remember everything, now. I am Jerome Moore.’”

‘How do you know that?’

‘Last night, in my dream, I was in the retirement home, as I said. I was alone and felt very tired. Physically and mentally tired. I was wondering at the close of my life if it had mattered whether I had lived or not. Yes, I fathered two children. But who’s to say that

they would've been born to someone else, if not me and Shannon?'

"I told him to go on."

'Death came into the room, then.'

'How did you know it was Death?'

'I just knew.'

'What did he look like?'

'He wasn't a skeleton carrying a sickle, if that's what you mean. I'm not really sure how to describe him, actually. Older, grey haired, wearing grey clothes. The type who blends in almost anywhere, but who you recognize right away once you do notice him.'

"'What did he say?' I asked, taking my notes. For I felt that this may very well be a breakthrough.

“He said that Death informed him that it was his time. Then he asked Death the same questions he had been asking of himself. That is, he wanted to know whether anything in his life had mattered.

“He then said that Death told him ‘You humans have this misplaced desire for greatness. You feel that only those with honor and fame make a difference in the world. Yet all of you are known intimately by God. What makes you think that millions of people knowing your name make that good situation any better?

“Death apparently went on to tell him that no one ever really does anything for humanity. ‘Humanity’ is only a concept. Rather, all people who do for others really do for those around them. Their actions are for their neighbors. If it seems like they have done a larger service, it is only because the people they loved and helped went on to bless the people in their lives, and so

on, creating a ripple that sweeps up, in some cases, large numbers. Yet no one is a blessing to ‘humanity.’ Only humans.”

“Did your patient accept the answer he received?” Christopher asked. “I mean, I don’t think Death is an actual entity, but he clearly did. Don’t you therapists have to play along somewhat with your patients?”

“To a degree, yes,” Thorne said. “According to the patient, Death showed him his whole life from that moment into the past. So he could see that he mattered. That Mooresville mattered.”

“But why in reverse?” I asked.

“According to him, Death had said that he needed to work his way back so that he could see the effects before the causes. Otherwise, it might not have the same effect.”

“Right. If we know the end of the story, then we have the objective in mind throughout the entire tale,” Beaumont said. “It’s always in the forefront, and we are making connections all through. If it simply told his life story, we would have a harder time seeing where it was going.”

“It may also demonstrate that God, or Death, or both have a grasp on time and events that we don’t,” Fowler said. “We only experience time in one direction, one moment after another. To see all moments, in any order, I imagine the picture does become clearer.”

“It’s the difference between looking at a whole painting and sticking your nose on just one corner of it,” Christopher said, with a slight smile.

“After that,” Thorne continued. “He told me that it was Death who had put him on that road. So that he’d be found and able to tell his story.”

“To you?” I asked.

“To us,” Beaumont corrected.

“The patient kept insisting that he was Jerome Moore, despite my attempts to prove him otherwise. Then, he told me that he would be leaving soon.

“At that, I put him on a suicide watch, and increased his medication. But then…”

Dr. Thorne shook his head and took a long drink of water.

“The lights flickered that evening. About midnight. When the power came back on, the patient had disappeared. We put the hospital on lockdown, searched everywhere, but never found him. I can’t explain it.”

Only two more things need to be added. The first is that upon further investigation, Dr. Thorne managed to track down some of Jerome Moore's grandchildren. After some initial hesitation, one of them came up to Oakwood to meet with him.

The grandson had last seen his grandfather at that Matheson County fair. He brought some old photographs that, according to Thorne, matched the amnesiac he had been treating. The most logical explanation, (although not the most satisfactory to a secular mind), is that somehow Jerome himself had been sent to tell his story. As the reader may guess, the patient had never been found, even with further efforts.

Dr. Thorne and the grandson went to the former site of Mooresville. The only thing left at this point is the old, neglected cemetery. The church and broken-down cars have been cleared away. Most of the former farmland

has been reclaimed by the woods. Yet the graves of Shannon and Jerome Moore remain, along with those of people who came before.

It is a sad ending, from the world's point of view. We who try to find satisfaction in wealth, power, fame, honor or pleasure. Dr. Christopher reminds me that Solomon, and later Boethius, tried to warn us against such goals, which only end in further craving and ultimate disappointment. Fowler reminds us that memories aren't people but that we have the greater hope of real, eternal life. Beaumont echoes Pastor's words that the desire to be remembered is merely a holdover from our Norse heritage. But the Second Coming is no Ragnarök. Moreover, we are all seen and loved by God, from his vantage point of eternity.

The other thing to mention is this. Moore's grandson published an account of the Mooresville

incident, as he termed it. He changed some names and embellished it considerably. The preceding pages give the actual account as it was related to us by Thorne. I have not included all our interruptions, and only recorded our responses that I believed interesting or insightful.

I will not seek to publish this manuscript any time soon, as some of my colleagues are private people. I will share it with others who are curious. For its final message may very well be the words of Death. That in the long run, the greatest and only real fame is that of being known by God and knowing him in return.

-Walter Jameson, President, Oakwood University

On love stories

Before we can discuss love stories, we must first reflect on the role of story in our lives. First, it must be said that story is one of the arts. As human beings, one

of the biggest things we do is to navigate and make sense of our world. We take in information, and process it through reason, experience, faith and feeling. We also can divide our knowledge and subjects into four broad areas. Each discipline uses all four of our mental faculties, but each one emphasizes one over the others. Thus, we have philosophy, which emphasizes reason, science, which emphasizes experience, religion, which emphasizes faith, and the arts, which emphasize feeling and emotion. To be sure, crafting a work of art, whatever the medium, requires a lot of thought, but the ultimate goal is to make others feel something, as well as think it.

Story is part of the arts, and thus, stories are there to make us feel, to uplift and inspire us, and to take us somewhere we haven't been before. Where that is depends on genre. Fantasy and adventure stories inspire

our imagination, and give us feelings of awe and wonder. Horror, mystery and suspense enable us to feel fear, without actually being in danger. Romance, or love stories, exist to give us the feeling of passion, and explore love.

What then is love? While we have one word for it, the Greeks have three. , phileo or love for friends and family, eros, or romantic, and agape, or divine. C. S. Lewis in his book *The four loves*, describes affection, friendship, eros and agape. While there are stories that deal with all loves, eros is most likely the one that comes into the minds of people when they hear the term ‘love story’ or ‘romance.’

Love stories, like any general literary genre, or individual franchise, of course has its tropes and clichés. In love stories, there are four basic ones:

· Misunderstood love. This covers tales like Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice, which involves the hero and heroine misinterpreting each other's feelings and motives. Elizabeth Bennett sees Mr. Darcy as a pretentious snob, until he helps save her younger sister from the disgrace of running off with a man without being married. Thus, Darcy shows his good side, Elizabeth reconsiders her earlier rash assessments of him, and they are free to explore their own possible relationship.

· Forbidden love. This involves two lovers who try to pursue a relationship despite living in a society that throws obstacles in their way. In Romeo and Juliet, the lovers are on opposite sides of a feud. In the Star Wars Prequel trilogy, Anakin Skywalker is a Jedi, which requires him

to live like a monk and not form attachments, despite his feelings for Padme. This subtype of the love story has the potential for more outward conflict than some of the others, but is also prone to melodrama, i.e. emotion that is exaggerated and ‘over the top.’

· Damaged love. The best example of this may well be Beauty and the Beast. One of the lovers, usually the man, comes with a great deal of baggage. If not a literal monster, he has become bitter and outwardly unlovable. The other lover, usually the woman, reaches out to him in compassion, and together, they begin the slow process of healing. Once healed and restored, the lovers have their relationship as the well deserved reward.

· Forgotten love. By this, I mean the typical plot of a Hallmark Movie. In these types of stories, one of the lovers, this time usually the female, has left her home to build a career. But in the process, she forgets the importance of love and connection with others. She returns home, either for the holidays or for some other reason, and meets the other lover, usually a man she has known a long time, albeit not very well. The man is usually more laid back, and enjoys life more, and teaches her to do the same. Sometimes, the genders of this trope are reversed, and the woman is the free spirited ‘manic pixie dream girl’ who must show a stuffy man how to live and love.

Clichés and tropes develop in any genre because they do admittedly happen in life. Sometimes even often. If not, they wouldn't develop and be used so extensively in the first place. Hence, life can be melodramatic, obstacles to relationships, like family and societal approval can be a hindrance, and people can lose track of the most important things in life.

The tropes become tiresome, not because they are used, but because they are overused. If a story relies solely on them, then it is almost always due to lazy writing. So while the stories that first gave the trope will probably endure, the imitation stories will not. Readers, sophisticated and not, can sense this. They also know deep down, that while we all wish things were simpler, life usually isn't. We sometimes

overcomplicate things, but more often, we oversimplify.

Perhaps the best of love stories, and ultimately the most relatable ones, are those which show a realistic life of a character, while also weaving in the themes of love and loss . I will discuss two that aren't listed as 'romance' but have relationships at their anchor.

In F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, the title character pines for a wealthy woman who is unreachable due to her social class and marital status. He resorts to legal and not so legal means to acquire wealth and win her heart. Unfortunately, a tragic misunderstanding results in his murder, and his lover goes back to her husband with no further thoughts of him. She doesn't even attend his funeral.

On the surface, this might seem a ‘deconstruction’ of the love story. After all, it is a forbidden love story that goes horribly wrong. While such tales usually are tragic, the idea that the lovers cared for each other is still there. In Gatsby, the indifference of Daisy Buchanan flies in the face of that. Furthermore, the narrator, Nick, describes Gatsby’s desire as something he usually scorns.

But there is more here than a ‘deconstruction’. That term is just a fancy term for destruction and nihilism. That isn’t what is happening here. It delineates the difference between love and desire or passion. For love is something that transcends emotion. It is that which seeks the welfare of its beloved and sticks with it through thick and thin. Daisy’s failure to do this shows that theirs was an affair of passion, not of

love. Thus, the tale is not nihilistic. It's message is not to say that life is horrible. Rather, it is cautioning the reader to be careful. Never mistake passion for love. Be careful what, or whom, you dedicate your life to.

The second one, which deals with life and coming of age is Louisa May Alcott's Little Women. It is the story of four sisters, Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy. Chronicling the girls' adolescence and early adulthood, we follow their lives and loves during this period.

The eldest marries and becomes a wife and mother. Tensions develop when they struggle to maintain a work, life and family balance. Meg feels that John neglects his duties as a father, while John feels neglected as a husband. With Meg's mother

giving her guidance, they do work through their conflict, and emerge the stronger and happier for it.

The girls' neighbor, Laurie, falls in love with Jo, who cares for him, but only as a friend. He is hurt by this, and all the more so because he has difficulty letting go of the chance of a relationship with her. He eventually works through his feelings of anger and disappointment by confiding in Amy, whom he bumps into when both are abroad.

In the end, he works through it, and is rewarded with a relationship with Amy. Jo, intelligent and independent, ends up marrying an academic more her intellectual equal. Beth, the most ethereal and least worldly, cares for neighbors suffering from scarlet fever, only to pass away from the disease herself. Her love is phileo and agape. Eros doesn't

touch her, nor does she even seem concerned with it.

By focusing on lives of characters, and not taking short cuts with clichés, a love story can stand apart from the many other stories that have been written and filmed. Indeed, the chances that the readers and viewers will see themselves in the characters becomes greater the more believable they are. And by relating to them, the characters will move the audience, inspire them, and perhaps even teach them something about this mysterious thing we call life.